

Essays on Performance Writing,
Poetics and Poetry

Volume 2

Also by John Hall

Between the Cities

Days

Meaning Insomnia

Malo-Lactic Ferment

Couch Grass

Repressed Intimations

Else Here: Selected Poems

Apricot Pages (A Novella)

Couldn't You?

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Interscriptions (with Peter Hughes)

Keepsache: A companion selection to Else Here

On Performance Writing, with Pedagogical Sketches

(Volume 1 of the present collection)

Writings towards Writing and Reading

On poetics, with implicated readings

Volume 2 of
Essays on Performance Writing
Poetics and Poetry

JOHN HALL

with a foreword by Marianne Morris

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Contents

Author's Note	7
Foreword by Marianne Morris	9

Part One: On Poetics

Writing and Not Writing	15
Eluded Readings: trying to tell stories about reading some recent poems	24
On Repetition, some aphorisms	46
Falling towards each other: occasions of elegy	50
Time-play-space: playing up the visual in writing	60
Five Minutes on Poetry and Public Language, the topic and the book so named	72
“As a”	74

Part Two: Implicated Readings

“My Head was away and singing”: Kelvin Corcoran on and in song	79
A variation as a brief essay on Allen Fisher	94
A sonnet of sorts, for Harry Guest	95
Lee Harwood: map-reader	96
ET: the missing letters of Peter Hughes' <i>Behoven</i>	98
Dress and Address: “John James” in John James	116
Nicholas Johnson's longer poems: a reader to other readers	132
Karen Mac Cormack's <i>Implexures</i> : an implicated reading	139
On Geraldine Monk	158
Beginning to read Alice Notley's <i>In the Pines</i>	159

Three pieces on Douglas Oliver:	
Some things I wanted to say about Doug	163
Ventriloquising Against Harm: an extended review of Douglas Oliver's <i>Whisper "Louise"</i>	166
“So you don't tell all your meaning”: two poems by Douglas Oliver	185
Terms of Engagement in F.T. Prince	194
Two essays on poems by J.H. Prynne	
Punishment Routines	200
Acquisition of Love	203
Two pieces on John Riley	
These lines are to remember John Riley	210
John Riley, poet	216
Two essays on Peter Riley:	
Peter Riley: on <i>Lines on the Liver</i> and <i>Tracks and Mineshafts</i>	225
Before you fall	233
Strictly Illegal: John Wieners with Gilbert and George (a review)	238
Notes	243
Cited Works	257
Index	267

Author's Note

The Author's Preface for this two-volume collection of essays appears at the beginning of Volume 1, together with an introductory essay by Larry Lynch. That volume includes my essays on Performance Writing together with a few essays addressing broader pedagogical matters for arts teaching. This volume concerns itself primarily with poetry, with an internal division between essays on poetics and essays arising from readings of specific poets and poems.



My thanks go to all the editors and publishers who prompted these essays and made them accessible in the first place and now for giving their agreement for them to reappear here. A note at the relevant points in the endnotes gives details in each case.

I am very grateful to Marianne Morris for writing a foreword for this volume.

Other thanks and acknowledgements appear in the author's preface to Volume 1.



References to essays that are included in the two volumes appear in brackets with the number of the volume followed by a colon and then page number(s), as for example: (1: 196) for a reference to page 196 of Volume 1.

John Hall, May 2013

Foreword by Marianne Morris

The essays collected in this volume explore and articulate a field of works by authors that span various poetic traditions and tendencies, which are linked here through organic means such as place, invitation, occasion, and relationship. Organised and inspired by what might be called unauthorised means, these essays begin to perform the answer to some of Hall's own critical questions and uncertainty about literary authority and its origins: the paradox being that, for Hall, it is public language that either assumes or contests authority, whereas poetic language is often a private voice and knowledge. Neither category fully excludes the other, however, which in turn poses a number of questions about how to deploy public language in poetry. This uncertainty regarding authority also arises out of an ongoing question in the work about how to let writing be one identity among a series of other identities which vie equally for a body's time. The candour of 'Writing and Not Writing', the first essay in this volume (2: 15–23), brings an inhabited subjectivity into the periphery of all the resultant inquiries.

Situated as they are within these emergent and contingent spaces, the essays themselves perform a similar movement of emergent articulation, often beginning without a sense of where they will lead. The exploration itself becomes a methodology, bound up with the knowledge that any investment in a particular outcome alters what is possible in the living practice of writing. The discourse, then, allows itself to be influenced by a vast array of memorial sources, from the voice of a late friend appearing on an answering machine, to the serendipitous connections between seemingly disparate lines of reading that intersect during the writing process. All such materials are folded in to illuminate each other, and are brought to bear on the more traditional and technical methods of reading such as rhyme, metre, extra-textual echoes, and space.

The piece on 'Eluded Readings' (2: 24–45), for example, takes a seemingly arbitrary selection of poems and reads them one at a time, testing their surfaces for in-roads. Within this tentative framework, Hall attempts to explain or at least include in the discourse of literary criticism the almost mystic trails that open up when one follows a path opened by

language. The writing, in other words, is itself the line of inquiry, making its own rules within the confines of its discursive commitment.

This is not to say that the work isn't supported by a strong critical framework: Hall's openness regarding questions about the direction of critical inquiry and about the supporting sources that are used to illuminate certain lines of possibility is supported by an absolutely rigorous attention to the specifics of context, background, etymology, and technical precision, thereby striking a balance between open inquiry and rigorous criticality.

Hall's position as writer oscillating between personal knowledge and the more widely accepted discourse of the literary or academic is also communicated through ethics, in a hyperawareness of the disconnection between the actions of bodies and the action of an individual writing body, and a concern not to let writing "talk over the heads of any relations of consumption". This explicit aim is set out early on in these writings, but continues as a thread throughout the volume, and finds a particular symbiosis in Hall's writing on Douglas Oliver, whom he sees as understanding the difference between "speaking for others" and "knowing how others speak". Hall describes the traumatic events of Oliver's personal memoir, which feature strongly in his poetry, as being in direct confrontation with what Oliver calls "heartless university-driven political questions". Hall puts the contradiction most explicitly: how can a writing, which is done by a body, not acknowledge or incorporate that body's memories into its writing, if memories are, as Hall puts it, "knowledge that won't go away". Simple negation of what won't go away is not an answer either, for, as he acknowledges, even an admission as seemingly absolute as "I don't want her" is a signal of 'strong negative desire' rather than a lack of interest".

In Hall's own project and poetics, these questions are navigated through an insistence on context, meaning that the foregrounding of memoir becomes appropriate or necessary as a result of the occasion, not as an absolute predetermined requirement or taboo. I see this not just as a "golden middle" approach that wishes to allow itself to come under the influence of a variety of potentially illuminating sources and methods, but as an intervention of sorts against gang-manifestos, spectacular politics, and fashionable academic methodologies and pieties. Writing is the transformative ritual at the forefront of the work, and its primary pedagogy is a rigorous reading practice. In the British literary milieu spanning 1970 to the present day, which one can imagine being at turns both stifling in its

affinities and cavernous in its distances, and constantly re-organising itself socially and spatially, Hall's essays navigate the pull to be sure of anything, always seeking a new route through the texts, and always returning to the practice of a body writing to find its home.

Marianne Morris
March 2013

PART ONE

On Poetics

*Writing and Not Writing*¹

1.

This piece is intended to be an account from within not of writing but of not-writing. It is autobiographical and schematic. It tries to deal with a sense which moves in and out of being a loss, a grief. It is not-writing as a shadow-process, taking its meaning from its relation to the identity of being a writer, to the processes of writing. Memories of writing play a part in what must remain a process of not-writing.

2.

Concern with process places the value in the act itself more than in the outcome and usually in a way that makes understanding of the process a special knowledge of those who do it, of primary practitioners. Perhaps it is worth distinguishing quickly between production processes and ritual or ceremonial processes. In the first case process is the means of arriving at a certain kind of product: there is an outcome, in the form of an artefact, which is intended to survive the process of production, and to survive as more than a record. A different process, which arrived at the same end, would do. In ritual and ceremony, the process—the sequence of moves made—is the event: the expected outcome might be some form of social or personal transformation rather than a produced object.

It is in the nature of writing that a script is produced and that this is an outcome which survives the event of its own production. In certain kinds of writing the script is a score for any number of later enactments which are the processes of its reading. Sometimes these might derive their force from the belief that they are re-enactments of the original circumstances and processes of the writing.

Writing and reading—of the kind being assumed in this discussion—are now most usually individual acts. This lets us get at some of the difficulties in the notion of process. We are looking for a ritual value in production processes and the ceremonies are increasingly individualised. A key ceremony is performed arcanelly—because in “private”—by a writer. The script which is the outcome of the ceremony does not lead us all the

way back into the original ceremony itself, whose privileged site is the writer him/herself.

It follows that only writers can return from the act of writing with a special knowledge of how a script comes into being. They can bring back travellers' accounts and in the telling imply that it is from the very being of a writer that scripts emanate, rather than from the inherited mechanical processes of the scripts themselves.

3.

Being "a writer" is a matter of identity, ontological. "Writing" is, in contrast, a verb-noun, a material process. In a society whose economy is still founded on literacy it happens all the time. Few of the people who do it are "writers".

The condition—that of being a "writer"—colours the verb. Not all writing is "writing". In the last ten years I have written many thousands of words but when my friends ask me, am I writing, I say, no, hardly at all. And from the way they ask I know it would be better to say yes, perhaps for their sake. It turns out that there are many who need to feel that writing, along with other arts activities, stands as authentic, uncompromised human behaviour. Being a "writer" is a threatened, entirely marginal condition, and at the same time strangely revered and envied.

I was one of those who tried—very briefly, it now seems in retrospect—to prepare and maintain with single-mindedness (in a singular, in a single condition) the identity of being a writer. At first I didn't know what else to be. There was no other obvious way to like myself. The aspiration itself entailed scorn of so many other identities, and a form of prospective irony awaited just about any of the pragmatic decisions about the earning of income that sooner or later would have to be made. And this dislike of any other possible self was (is) a helpless ethical judgement, lacking any practical grasp of economics and power. Within a dislike of a world that had no place for writers there was no strategy with which to confront this situation except to become a writer. This first phase, which depended on the kinds of support which tend to go with being a student, lasted from about 1966 to 1971, when I returned to university to do a postgraduate teaching year. Between 1972 and 1976 I was employed as a schoolteacher, married, had a first child, bought and refurbished a house. For one year I switched to part-time. This represented an attempt to find a balance of

energy and engagement, between hired work and work which represented nothing but choice. Single-mindedness had certainly gone, because there was too much else to do. From 1976 to the present I have been employed in Higher Education. At first this was in a way that was calculated to support and complement the writing. During this time a second child and a second and then a third house and a changing climate for education—all of this made for an energy field that was always multiple, that was anything but single—in which writing had to find its place alongside any number of insistent (and often pleasurable) demands, and which increasingly, because its demands seem at times absolute, it failed to do.

4.

The question I now find myself asking in some bewilderment, looking back at the earlier single-mindedness, is what drives anyone to take up so fragile a position? Modernism had the answer pat: “there was no choice, it was what I had to do”. This is, of course, a descendant of the religious calling, passed down through romanticism’s project of the self and the imagination. My own cultural formation, like so many in the sixties, still drew on the residues of an earlier aristocratic culture, with which liberal humanist education was still imbued, and was permeated with a contempt for commerce (usually unspoken). In terms of possible identities the conflicts were more between different forms of service, than with any possibility of commercial or industrial work. Perhaps writing seemed the purest form of service, at the furthest remove from the army or the law. In practice there were a number of available positions, giving logic to a stance that at one moment felt plangently archaic, at the next a preparation of *the* language of a preferred future. In either case, the politics of the position was entirely Utopian, as though there were a project that could invoke anything as global as *the* language, and at the same time not get its feet very dirty.

5. *There isn't enough time...*

As a material process writing takes time. And of course you don't just sit down and do it when you happen to have time. Writing takes time, especially when you are not actually writing but are behaving and thinking in a way that leads to writing.

Sometimes this means thinking about writing, about what writing is, about what it is you think it is because of what you have been trying to do or because of something you have just read.

For most, reading is part of the work of writing. There is so much to read. Reading is so slow. And reading is supposed not to be your life but to be something that illuminates your life. You go off on your own to do it. And in your relations with others they don't always let you do it (the young child's fist against the book which steals the parent's eyes and ears); or, recognising your relations with others, you don't always let yourself. Sometimes you tell yourself and them that it is part of your work, invoking a quite different order of necessity, including most emphatically that of the pay cheque. Maybe it is for a lecture or an article. There are times when it is more generally permitted such as on holiday or when you are travelling on your own.

6.

Keats could not concentrate on his medical lectures because he was thinking in writing. In his case he was distracted by sensations and imaginings that already had a latent opacity of phrased words about them. There might even be suggestions of rhyme. This is a matter in the first place of modality: medical knowledge is not the same as poetic apprehension. But it is also a question of time, since each modality demands its own duration. It is not simply a case of switching from one to the other. When you regularly give time to something, your body is disposed towards it, and is constantly anticipating future moves.

And when the writing is done, when these words are drawn as sounds on paper or on a machine with its own memory like the one I use now, then there is another matter, another material decision: what do you do with them, where do they go in the clutter of data and possession, in all the stored knowledge of citizenship and salaried work? These phrases which, despite appearances, are not formed out of an optional playfulness, but which carry with them their own necessity, are not complete until they have somewhere to go. It matters very much where this should be, what kind of reply it might constitute. If there is nowhere—and therefore no kind of reply—the process is incomplete or frustrating. Only those who are powerfully driven to do so keep going.

Within my own writing, as it lost its own continuities and momentum, there was increasingly a problem of modalities. Earlier I had become used

to the idea of a sequence or a book, the formal integrity which brings a number of discrete pieces together and which often derives continuity from the sense of unfinished business left behind by each poem or session of prose. With discontinuity of time (though I did adopt a number of formal strategies to build discontinuity into the structure) there are too many starts. A variety of strategies take off from a hierarchy of different energies. As a result I didn't know where to put anything. I kept getting confused between a number of notebooks. There was a journal, for example, that traced reading. (Actually there were different journals for different kinds of reading, either because the books appeared to belong to different ways of knowing and sounding about knowledge, or because they belonged to different aspects of my own identity, e.g. the paid and the non-paid bits.)

This journal was supposed to hold on to the reading that would otherwise get lost—hold on to it both by ritualising it (rehearsing parts of it, for example, or reciting it) and by storing it—and if it got lost what point was there? There were two models of reading getting in each other's way: (i) I am always a becoming of what I have read; I don't need to remember it because it is me. The phrases of other writers are as it were the musculature with which I move, culturally speaking, through the world. How could it be otherwise?; (ii) what I have read I know; it is the capital I amass; there is an obligation to "know" certain writings; and precisely because I am haunted by the possibility of losing the knowledge I must keep my accounts. According to each model there is a disturbing twist in the direction of history from time to time, that can follow the movement of politics. For example, those writers who formed me, without warning, and in retrospect, appeared to speak from a time before the one we are in; it is not their fault; they didn't know that history would turn them into liars; and that I would be their lies. Or that what I knew in the way of a special knowledge that others could at one time have been persuaded of the need for, had lost its value, its currency.

There was yet another journal which noted daily events: what had been done each day. Its literalness, especially in times when little of value seemed to be being achieved, was reassuring. This was a writing produced by disbelief, an extended sequence of alibis. Where once earlier these notebooks had been the "source" for writings, not accounts of reading, but writings of reading and meditation, drawing on all the day's residues, and gathering momentum from a sequence of preoccupations and motifs,

now they were records of other necessities. Who would have thought that was done in the day? In writing these thoughts now, a repressed text in this journal becomes very clear: Can't you see why I couldn't be doing anything else? Why shouldn't a writing emerge from this range of activities? But the records are not so much memorials as substitutes for the active process of memory. There is a writing whose destiny is precisely oblivion: a trace which obliterates the trace, a swift naturalism acting to suppress what could have formed as memory.

This one had to be, literally, a book, each entry deriving its logic from its place in a sequence which mimicked a sequence from part of a life. Bits of paper get lost among other bits of paper (though sometimes when that did happen, the loss—the sense of loss—felt truer than the omissions). When the last page of the book was full the sequence was taken to have run its course. More would have been more of the same.

7.

I am describing very simple activities, very simple uses of writing, and ones which became increasingly privatised, as registers of personal senses of necessity without taking on the public rhythms of a different order of necessity. They had become supplementary, spare-time activities even if the spare time had to be fabricated at some cost.

8.

For so simple an activity there were too many problems, too many conflicts between different forms of support and sustenance, and between notions of “useful” work. Anything I do is sustained in a number of possible ways. I get paid for it. I get thanked for it. I am asked to do it and so know that I am needed. I do it to support those I support, who support me. I also may be driven to it out of appetite or curiosity or incompleteness, though whether these impulses will sustain and support it is another matter.

It is the simple traffic of personal energy in its relation to others. It raises the question of the differing “others” of writing, of domestic and of salaried life. Sometimes the question is framed as “who are you writing for?”. I think it is more: what is the set of relations implied by the act of writing? What pattern of love and company and rivalry is called up—not in the “content” so much as in the communicative gestures and the positions implied from the direction of the writing's gaze? Which

community operates as the determinants of which acts? The silence of writing can be very puzzling in this respect—very grandiose too or, alternatively, suddenly empty. Perhaps I am talking of what happens when contradictory “relations of production”—both “real” and virtual—are at work, and when an activity such as writing (there are, of course, others) sets itself to talk over the heads of any relations of consumption, when the pronouns of the discourse—including the *you* and the *I*—need have no sets of referents who “actually” have to live together.

9.

A theme which is emerging in this particular writing could be put this way: there are writings which confirm the belonging of both writer and writing in a palpable set of relations (instead of “palpable” I was going to say “immediate”, but on the whole it is precisely the immediate relations which do not need a writing—whence another set of tensions) and which may even be called into being by those relations. The palpability is expressed through forms of exchange, such as pay or requests or even the palpable exchange of pleasures. And there are other writings which eschew a belonging or seek one which does not yet exist. The paradox here is to remember that there is usually a community of fellow-seekers operating within an intense sense of belonging of their own.

The activity, to keep occurring, must somehow be supported; and where there is a lack of material support it must be compensated for ideologically, with belief. Levels of material support and forms of belief both fluctuate. Knowledge can move in and out of brackets, or shift from becoming ground into becoming figure. What was felt to be a climate that was hostile to writing in the late sixties can seem friendly in retrospect, since no one then quite anticipated the form of right-wing radical materialism that came to be known as Thatcherism.

So how does a writing that doesn't sell in the volume the capitalist market requires ever get supported? The obvious answer is that it is subsidised by the writers themselves, both individually and mutually. Many writers accept relative poverty as the cost of their enterprise. Many others in effect do two jobs and work extraordinary hours. Some are lucky to have the two jobs in a symbiotic relation: teaching, for example, from the source material for their writing. There is also domestic subsidy, provided by partner or family. Compared with all these, official subsidy and direct payment for writing are negligible.

Apparently I once said that I would avoid three things as hostile to the project of writing: marrying, owning a house and having children. I married. I bought a house. I had children. I dread to think what would have happened if I hadn't. My job (as schoolteacher first) was serious and rewarding and demanding; it had its own processes to be engaged in and an immediacy of "publication", of call and response. It was so much easier to say that I was a teacher than a writer. When I wasn't remembering what I was not doing I knew who I was, and was operating altogether at a different order of impossibility.

So what was it that I wasn't doing and how did I know that I wasn't? There were the records of my own words, precisely because I had been a writer. They shifted in and out of time. Sometimes I even, quite literally, lost them. I began to find it difficult to read any fictions or poetry that were not part of an immediate exchange with others. I quickly lost any appetite for converting others to the writing that gave me pleasure unless they first gave some sign. It was daunting to be reminded so frequently of the specialised nature of such pleasures.

10.

Do I need to do it and is it needed are two different questions, but related.

11.

The book of the mirror
The book of the breast
The book of silence
The book of babbling
The book of images
The book of idols
The book about words
The book of clenched teeth
The book of birth
The book of remembering
The book of forgetting
The book of loved distances
The book of near-sighted love
The book of frightened love
The book of lenses
The book of passages

The book of porches
The book of the cloister
The book of pathways
The book of reasoning
The book of chance
The book of falling
The book of distractions from the book
The book of the denial of loss
The book of inarticulate loss