

KING'S
College
LONDON
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Opening of the Eric Mottram Archive

Monday 19 January 1998

Programme Notes

17.45 Lecture:

Identifying Praise: in moments of Henry James & Fred Astaire

by *Stanley Cavell*

Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University

Interval

19.00 Performances:

Songs from A Book of Herne

music by *John Kenny*, text by *Eric Mottram*

Poetry Reading

by *Roy Fisher*

Free Improvisation

by *John Kenny* and *John Whiting*

The contributors

Stanley Cavell

Stanley Cavell (1926-), Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, is among the most distinguished contemporary American philosophers and cultural critics. Born in Atlanta, Georgia and early influenced by his teacher JL Austin and the work of Wittgenstein, Professor Cavell has produced an exceptional body of work exploring the nature and limits of philosophy, the pursuit of self-knowledge and the meanings of scepticism from many perspectives. A concern with assessing and mapping the contribution of an American philosophic tradition, from Thoreau and Emerson to the present, and the construction of a dialogue between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy is also a key preoccupation. Professor Cavell is as much at home examining Shakespeare or Hollywood comedies and melodrama as he is discussing the works of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and other major philosophers.

Professor Cavell's books include the following: *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (1995), *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (1994), *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990), *The New Yet Unapproachable America:*

Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein (1989), *The Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988), *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987), *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (1980), *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981), *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (1979), *The Senses of Walden* (1972), *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971), *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (1969), and *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (1996).

John Kenny

Born in 1957 in Birmingham, John Kenny is a multi-faceted performer. As a trombonist his interests include contemporary solo repertoire, modern jazz and early music. He also works as an actor and is active as a composer, having received commissions from the London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, and in 1989 was Strathclyde Composer in Residence to the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

He is professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, lecturer at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, and in 1993 was elected Associate of the Royal Academy of Music. He lives in Edinburgh with his wife and two children.

John Whiting

From 1960, Jon Whiting worked for KPFA in Berkeley, California, America's first listener-supported non-commercial radio station. His monograph on the first ten years of its history was published by the University of Aarhus in Denmark. His subsequent career has been devoted to both words and music. As an international sound designer based in London, he has worked with many music ensembles, opera houses and symphony orchestras, also performing and teaching at music schools and festivals including those of Darmstadt, Stuttgart, Stockholm and Huddersfield. His frequent work with John Kenny over many years has been one of his most satisfying associations.

As a writer, John Whiting was joint recipient of a Composer-Librettist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States. He regularly contributes what he himself refers to as "diatribes on the state of the arts and society" to European and American publications and has just published a journal of his gastronomic travels around France. His recently-established Diatribal Press is devoted to "information and entertainment for intelligent readers."

Roy Fisher

Roy Fisher was born in Birmingham in 1930 and lived there for forty years before moving North, first to teach American Literature at Keele University and then to work as a freelance writer, jazz pianist and broadcaster: he now lives in the Peak District of Derbyshire. Since the mid-1960s he has given many readings and tutorial sessions and has held a variety of residencies. He has collaborated with the artists Tom Phillips, Ian Tyson, Ronald King and Derrick Greaves; his translations of Schubert songs have been recorded by Shura Gehrman. In 1991 he provided the script and music for a documentary film, *Birmingham's What I Think With*, directed by Tom Pickard. His *Poems 1955-1987*, and his long poem *A Furnace* were published by Oxford University Press; his most recent publications are *Birmingham River* (Oxford 1994) and *The Dow Low Drop: New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe 1996). He recently received one of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's five £15,000 Poetry Awards.

The Exhibition

The Eric Mottram Collection includes a variety of different media: written and printed matter, tape recordings and gramophone records, photograph albums, art works and posters. Primarily, cataloguing has concentrated on written matter, that is letters, essays, poems, diaries, notes, academic papers, plus little press booklets and little magazines, newspaper cuttings, reviews and biographical material. The main themes are American Studies, modern American and British writers, and of course Mottram's own poetry. Even this archive of written material comprises some 400 boxes, of which approximately 300 are now available for study.

The small exhibition or display may serve as a sample of the variety and high standard of material available in the archive. It features well-known American writers like William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, along with little press items from Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Duncan and DA Levy, with, from England, material from Basil Bunting, Bill Butler and Jeff Nuttall. Examples of some of Eric Mottram's less well-known projects will also be included: his collage-like poetry notebooks reflect a lifelong interest in collecting and arranging visual material,

while his work on early aviation for The Polytechnic of Central London reflects the emphasis he placed on technology in general cultural studies.

The Catalogue

A printed version and a computer version of the Eric Mottram Archive Catalogue, as of January 1998, will be on display. The computer display is there for you to try out for yourself if you like.

The Archive

The Eric Mottram Archive comprises 10 sections so far:

1 Mottram's personal papers; **2** Mottram's poems; **3** Mottram's publications; **4** Mottram as editor; **5** Authors: 20th Century creative writers in prose, poetry, drama, irrespective of country, organised by alphabetical order of surnames; **6** Promotional material; **7** magazines; **8** College material; **9** Mottram's essays; **10** Notes and newspaper cuttings

Songs from *A Book of Herne*

Notes by John Kenny

- 1: "*antlers broken*"
- 2: *Herne Oak*
- 3: *From the Exeter Book*
- 4: *Herne Oak*
- 5: *Epilogue*: Song without words

These settings of four poems from Eric Mottram's *A Book of Herne* originated with a commission from the Chamber Group of Scotland for the choreographer Rosina Bonsu and me to make a dance-theatre piece. I wanted to work with a poet to develop ideas of my own as a text, and a mutual friend, the sound designer John Whiting, suggested Mottram was my man; so we met to make plans; sadly, Eric died a few days later, a complete surprise to all his friends. At our only meeting, Eric gave me a signed copy of *A Book of Herne*, and I was bowled over by the power of his language and kaleidoscopic imagery; I immediately decided to use several of these poems as the generating material for my music.

I have to emphasise that my reaction to the words is very instinctive – my first impressions remain the strongest, based purely on the sound quality of language, and strong emotional suggestiveness of the imagery. I do not presume to fully *understand* the multi-layered references – but I know that Eric believed in honest gut reaction as a criterion for appraisal of art, so I have gone with my instinct, rather than agonising about literal meaning. I have discovered a mass of references to the work of other poets, mythology of many people, social history, Anglo Saxon riddles – all too complex to delve into here. But it does seem to me that there are themes which recur in all 40 of the poems in the anthology, and which appear particularly strongly in the four I have chosen: 1) Herne – ancient horned god of the forest, he appears throughout the northern hemisphere from Neolithic times on. Mottram uses Herne as a symbol both of primitive power and beauty, or a driving force in human existence which is amoral, to be harnessed for creativity or

destructiveness. Phallic symbolism abounds, most strongly in *Herne Oak*. It is also significant that Eric also lived at Herne Hill in London for over 30 years – to an extent, Herne becomes a personal metaphor. 2) The Green Man – the anthropomorphic spirit of death and re-generation, he appears repeatedly in unlikely settings e.g.: his tendrilled head arising from whale-spring corsets in *Herne The Hunter*. 3) The mutability of all things – the hunter becomes the hunted; there is a strong sense of yearning for something which *was*, and still *may be*, as in “*antlers broken*” and *From The Exeter Book* (actually a re-working of a fragment of Anglo Saxon riddle) where beautiful images of a night-time journey in forested shade is remembered from the high, windswept “*bleached limestone*”.

In my music I have been at pains to preserve the clarity of the words, since to me their *quality* is as important as their *meaning*. The voice and alto trombone interchange as much as Herne or the Green Man transform themselves in the poetic images; in no. 1 these two are a pure duo, in no. 2 they share the primary role of theme development. In no. 3 the voice becomes wordless melisma, whilst the trombonist becomes the spoken voice; in no. 4 this interchangeability is explored further, whilst no. 5 is a wordless epilogue. The other instruments have moments of soloistic exposure, but are treated more as a body of sound – the “land mass forests” and “field from amber resin” of *Herne Oak*.

Songs From A Book of Herne is dedicated to John and Mary Whiting.

Songs From *A Book of Herne*

by

John Kenny, to poems of Eric Mottram

Commissioned by The Chamber Group of Scotland, with
assistance from The Scottish Arts Council.

1.

*"antlers broken some time ago
left to swing from a branch
the deer I was now a wolf
this saddens me."*

2: *Herne Oak*

in full cry after dancers

hounds on scent the sun green cult

a man plant

horned goat or antlers

tail tassel flicks the eggs raises the horn

god hoofs

bog bone bock buck

god goat the good ghost

guide gaidha

gutha

go to the force

bald-faced stag

Baldur the beautiful lover

bald the horned

wine in goatskin

the penal skin

raised to a head

a man dancer in his cassock

skin close fit

*black horn in green packs
land mass forests
 where waves strike
 field from amber resin Herne Havoc strikes
 the sea
"Voice filled with custom of combat and unslaked lust"
"a hunger for green, a thirst for blue".*

4: *Herne the Hunter*

*in a green velvet dress
she hanged herself
black barn swaying gold glint
on her finger*

*his Colt smashes their fingers
opens neck Jed the law
a chartered gambling train
a drunk treck across clear snow*

*the Lincoln County clear test
old thirties gunslinger
sighted Matt Bronson
above and between the eyes*

*Jed Herne turns a bayonet between
barwing doors
slugs deep in leather
he burns down the sadist school*

*climbs slipping rocks
where bushwhackers cling
holster eyes
creek water one after the other*

*"helmet and hunting horn
words of the ageing"*

*in Mary Redciffe Cabot's
whale rib springs
from Green Man's tendrilled
engaging head from ocean*

*to forests now Jed
smashes the crust
recoils in the black humus*

3: *From the Exeter Book*

*both were Lord ... radiant array on forest ground
timbers helm under showers of night
backs dark and marvellous brothers
leather belly ... by his will ... waded
deep streams safe valleys
hoar frost in their tines
agile blood ... black swallowed water
hoof acts ... horned eyes
bare instep on leafy mould
wind tide in high oaks ... bleached limestone*

5: *Epilogue: Song without words*

Dedicated to John and Mary Whiting
Salzburg, August 9, 1995.