## NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

# Peter Dale

## The Light is Dark Enough

In the 1950s, aged fourteen, I knew I was going to be a poet. At that age, you may well know your destination but you've no idea of the best route and you lack handy directions to the nearest way forward. This was truer for me than perhaps for others in a similar fix since I was being brought up in a virtually bookless household with the nearest thing to poetry a hymn-book or two – but where the King James Version of the Bible was read aloud. This grounding in its rhythms was perhaps where the journey began. School was the obscure wood where I hoped the seldom trod track might show a trace or two.

The English master was an enthusiast for poetry, particularly formal verse and the works of Browning, a strange formalist. His heart was clearly in the right place but his head was elsewhere by several decades. He actually referred to Masefield as modern and the only Eliot he taught was 'La Figlia che piange'. Anyway, in one lesson, he introduced a poem by A. S. J. Tessimond, 'La Marche des machines'. He was, it seemed, expecting that, after his lessons so far, we'd be underwhelmed by this apparently modern poem. Well, not me. After Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and Masefield, I found the poem an invigorating breath of oxygen. This poem was my curious gateway to modernism. (Tessimond did write the uncollected 'Sunweb' which takes off from Eliot's poem.)

The next shock to the system was my coming across Pound's piece, 'Villanelle: The Psychological Hour', which was baffling and left doubts whether I had what it would take to be a poet. Abandon all hope. But, as Keats said, in poetry every man must work out his own salvation and, by that time, I was spending paper-round money on the odd slim volume but, more important, on the *London Magazine*. There, if ancient memory serves me right, I encountered another poem by A. S. J. Tessimond, 'Middle-aged conversation'. (He preferred the French way of presenting titles.) Again this poem held me: it had more than enough formal honing to impress even the English master and it had the succinctness almost of a Pope couplet.

'Are you sad to think how often
    You have let all wisdom go
For a crimson mouth and rounded
    Thighs and eyes you drown in?' 'No.'

‘Do you find this level country,
Where the winds more gently blow,
Better than the summit raptures
And the deep-sea sorrows?’ ‘No.’

– The English master should have appreciated those weighted caesuras but he was a Browning optimist.

Unsurprisingly, Tessimond’s early work shows odd traces of the influences on his period: imagism, Pound, the Audenesque occasional omission of articles but I did not pick that sort of thing up then. Later, I found hints from Baudelaire, Villon and Laforgue. He was a poet of city life as his selection, *Voices in a giant city* indicates; the opening part satires on various city and other types and the later poems more inward dramatic monologues.

Frost’s poem ‘The Road not Taken’ is, in one respect, back to front. You only know the road taken and the dozens of missed and rejected routes when you turn round, grey and and retrospective. And, from here, I can see that Tessimond’s little dialogue was the splinter under the skin which I extracted as the idea of duologue that underlies several approaches that developed in my own verse. Dialogue and conversation pieces are a dominant strand in Tessimond’s work, too, I learnt, where he becomes a brilliant classical generalist, somewhat isolated in the pervading ‘concretist’ poetics. He has been an unacknowledged early influence behind the Movementeers and even Larkin, in some respects. See his poem ‘Houses’ for a pointer or two but there are several other traces.

Another curious coincidence of these wanderings on and off the straight route lay in the fact that the first monolingual French book of poetry I acquired was a big volume of Jacques Prévert, a poet, as I later discovered, Tessimond has translated. – Translation, a thing I’d made a pact with myself never to do – and look where that example led?

Ironically, I later discovered how sniffily Pound had replied to Tessimond, the poet who had led me to Pound and modernism – by indirection finding direction out, the way of all poets. – But Pound had written a pretty shattering put-down for a young poet: ‘Cant see that yr. work has any marked individuality, or as yet any character to distinguish it from anyone elses.’ [Pound’s punctuation, the letter was quoted by Hubert Nicholson in *The Collected Poems of A. S. J. Tessimond*, Autolycus, 1985.] This letter must have been received around 1928. A. S. J. was about twenty-six. Tessimond’s encrypted rejoinder was perhaps ‘Tube station’, worth comparing with the approach in Pound’s haiku-type ‘On a Station of the Metro’.

In my teaching days, long-ago, Tessimond’s work became invaluable in introducing teenagers to poetry. His ‘Cats II’ is justifiably anthologized with

its unforgettable opening and closing, 'Cats no less liquid than their shadows /Offer no angles to the wind.'

The cat is, in one way and another, an image of life envied by Tessimond. – See the poem 'Night-life'. The cat shows a way through life that is without friction or commitment, but it was a way his turbulent inner self could never comfortably follow. Unfortunately, his formal skill went with, and honed, an acuteness of observation, an objectivity that he applied to his inner and outer self as well as satirically to the world around him. In the 1940s, he tried to resolve this conflict by consulting psychologists. The experience with these less than successful consultations lies behind 'The psychiatrist's song' and several other poems where he seems to have hoisted the shrinks with their own petard. See 'The Psycho-analyst', 'The Psychiatrist speaks', and the compendious 'The neurotics'. (It is considered a possibility that consultation and treatment may have contributed to his relatively early death from a haemorrhage which might have been a result of electric shock therapy.)

The satirical strand in his work is rather dominant, excellent and also good teaching material. In my teaching days, his 'Man in the bowler hat', and 'Money' were in dozens of school anthologies along with that cat of his, and not only because anthologists cannibalize each other or have hidden agendas, no allusion intended. Anthologists were also fond of 'The British', and not merely on grounds of length, compared with 'England (Autumn 1938)', where the method of proceeding through binary ambivalences and oxymoron, with chorus-type, interjected verses, is perceptive and sharp but, in the end, it leaves the British and, of course, behind them Tessimond, in their tangles of compromise and disequilibrium between inner and outer forces.

For, in many ways, despite all the surface scintillation of his verse, a deep darkness lies under it and in its author: 'The solving emptiness that lies/ Just under all we do…' was never far from Tessimond's reach. Among many examples, see 'Cocoon for a skeleton', or 'Betrayal' which concludes: 'What panes of glass conceal our beating hearts.'

Tessimond, as a good formalist, is one of the highly memorable and quotable poets, a quality the reports that he was a good conversationalist would perhaps tend to support. He indulged in haunting night-life spots. This way of life was his whistling in the dark, as the pre-Mr-Bleaney aspects of 'Song in a saloon bar' suggest:

> Here we turn from shadows' questions –
> Who we have been, will be, are –
> To the comfortable voices
> Telling stories in the bar …

Yet he was avid for the life of the senses fully lived, even though mostly it was a city existence, and in his own unstructured way. See the posthumously collected 'Apologia' for some possible background on this.

His eye is not only objectively applied to inner and outer shades of camouflage, shiftiness and hypocrisy but also to the sensuous world:

> Grape-bloom of distant woods at dusk;
> Storm-crown on Glaramara's head;
> The fire-rose over London night;
> An old plough rusting autumn-red.

The third line of this extract from 'England (Autumn 1938)' is, weirdly, almost prophetic of the Blitz. His method here of using a wide focus to close in on a nub was a favourite device. The imagist clarity never entirely left him:

> The Round Pond is dimpled
> only as much as
> a girl's knee.

The poem 'Where', which one inevitably contrasts with Larkin's so different 'Here', is filled with exotic colour: 'While the sea spreads peacock feathers on cinnamon sands …'

In a dramatic monologue with a long title, starting 'X while talking to a Professor …' collected posthumously, X is discussing whether he should encourage his daughter to attend university and ends:

> Shall she with this learned one
> Seek the dead? – or seek the living?
> Light of lamp or light of sun?

Tessimond himself loved both lights but he was not enamoured of the student's light, the lamp that Yeats suggested came from the tomb. His satire 'A Man of culture', on the people who live books more than life, is a virtuoso set of variations on Pope's attack on Addison.

> Spying the coming man before he's come,
> He beats the first premonitory drum;
> Aware which reputation's almost dead,
> He plans the funeral speech a year ahead.

The next unexpected crossing of paths was in the early 1990s when friend and contemporary, Ian Hamilton, was preparing *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. He showed me an impressive list of poets who, he thought, should be included and he wondered if I could think of any deserving names that had been overlooked. That list took some reading but I noticed Tessimond was missing. Almost inevitably, it seemed, I was offered the job of writing an entry on him. After Tessimond and I had criss-crossed each other for years, at last, we were figuratively to meet head on, though after those early encounters our routes had hardly run parallel like railway lines.

And here we are again. Is all good structure in a winding stair? The point has been reached where what was said in that entry should be expanded in retrospection.

Praised, or damned with the faintest praise, for being a 'formal' poet, clearly the concern for shaping is something I shared with Tessimond as well as the idea of dialogue mentioned above. Two minds is the least possible number for an intelligent person to be in, C. H. Sisson remarked somewhere. Duologue is the most succinct way to convey such things in verse. Tessimond was a dab hand at this and, fond of doing it economically, he was keen on the lyric of two quatrains. (Much of the Movement preferred three: thesis; antithesis; synthesis. Or the repetitious villanelle.) Tessimond leaves a poignant lack of synthesis to strike the reader for example, take 'Skaters' Waltz':

'… So tempting to let freeze
    One's deepest darkest pools
And learn to skim with ease
    Thin ice; for who but fools

Dive into who knows what?'
    'But if the ice by chance
Breaks?' 'But if not, if not?
    And how it glitters. Dance!'

– And that's how to maximise effects of enjambment. – See also 'Lovers' Conversation', a poignant twin quatrain, that must represent the thread of troubled relationships that run through his work, like a laddered stocking – in an image he would know. Most of his twin-quatrain poems are very effective.

His love poems are nearly all wishful or troubled. Two of the best and quietest are 'Not love perhaps' and 'Acknowledgement'.

Tessimond never reached resolution; he could never formalize the variousness of self and of the external world. And dissolution was always

the old mole working away in his thought and work. A great deal of his unhappiness stemmed from his inability to form stable relationships with women, a problem that created the many shades of love poem in his work.

The last and probably least important thing you need to learn about an artist of any sort is a bit of biography. Arthur Seymour John Tessimond was born in 1902 and brought up in Birkenhead. His mother was probably of Welsh ancestry; his father was a bank inspector. An only child, he felt a sense of unloved loneliness. Sent to Charterhouse at fourteen, he ran away to London at sixteen, hoping to be a journalist – for which occupation he was temperamentally unsuited, let alone without any life experience. After a few weeks he ended up back in Birkenhead and from there went on to four years at Liverpool University.

There was an engagement to marry which eventually came to nothing and, in another love pursuit, he followed a woman friend to London, where, after various jobs, he ended up in advertising as a copy-writer, a job in which he stayed. His views of that activity are acutely and satirically recorded in several poems. He never managed satisfactory relationships with women and spent much of an inheritance from his father in 1945 on psychologists as mentioned above. After lying dead for two days, he was found in his flat on 15th May 1962 – dead of causes mentioned above. But he never doubted his poetry and his self-knowledge deserves the last word from the close of 'Soliloquy of the artists':

> We admire the cat not only
> For its independence but for its privacy:
> Contrive to be
> World-intimate and sedulously lonely: …
>
> Call nothing sacrosanct:
> Spare none, not even ourselves: dissect
> All, ourselves most of all: nor expect,
> Save after our death, to be thanked.

And, at the back of that, in the wings, are Laforgue's Pierrots/Clowns of 'dandysme' – and perhaps not just formally.

*Note:*
This article is indebted to Hubert Nicholson for his edition *The Collected Poems of A. S. J. Tessimond*, Autolycus, 1985. The volume has been re-issued by Bloodaxe jointly with The Whiteknights Press, 2010.