

*Shape-Shifter*

BY GAVIN SELERIE AT SHEARSMAN BOOKS

Music's Duel: New and Selected Poems  
Collected Sonnets

# Shape-Shifter

—a tribute to Gavin Selerie—

*curated by*  
David Annwn

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2022 by  
Shearsman Books  
PO Box 4239  
Swindon SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office  
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB  
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-873-2

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publisher is grateful to the following: Gavin Selerie for permission to reprint 'Backstory' which originally circulated privately in an edition of 25 copies; Gavin Selerie and Binnacle Press for permission to reproduce 'That Dada Strain' from *The Riverside Interviews: Jerome Rothenberg* (Binnacle Press, 1984); Linda Black and Claire Crowther of *Long Poem Magazine*, who first published Gavin Selerie's 'Long Haul Voices'; Jeffrey Side of *The Argotist* (online), who first published the full version of Andrew Duncan's interview with Gavin Selerie as *Into the Labyrinth*, a free PDF eBook; Ian Seed of *Shadowtrain* who first printed Ian McMillan's review of *Music's Duel*; David Caddy of *Tears in the Fence*, who first printed Anthony Mellors' review of *Harlot Double*; and Geraldine Monk, for The Estate of Alan Halsey, who authorised the reproduction of 'A Maze for Grammatologists', first printed on the cover of *Shearsman* magazine, 1st series, n° 7, in 1982.

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Gavin Selerie

# TH<sup>a</sup>t ☺ DADA \* - STrain



*Pictorial treatment of Jerome Rothenberg's 'That Dada Strain'  
(text from the New Directions book of the same title).  
from Jerome Rothenberg, The Riverside Interviews.*





# David Annwn

## Preface

Due to Gavin Selerie's urgent health issues, it was decided to invite his friends and readers to contribute writings and images to an anthology of responses to his work.

Gavin is perhaps the most celebrated and well-known of English writers creating long Modernist and Late Modernist poems (the latter his own term) post-1970. As he himself writes:

I seem naturally drawn to structures which involve cumulative and twisting elements. The modernist long poem offers an escape from closure while still allowing progression. There is often a displacement of temporality.

(‘Long Haul Voices: the Book Length Poem’)

Book-length sequences such as *Azimuth* (1984), *Le Fanu's Ghost* (2006) and *Roxy* (1996) are landmarks in contemporary literature and this poet can just as readily explore smaller, shorter forms in collections like *Tilting Square* (1992) and *Southam Street* (1991), as well as the individual poems of his *Collected Sonnets* (2019) which stand out vividly like spars, strongly individual and yet also inter-related, by pattern and rhythmical structures, to other works.

In terms of context, the poet identifies with the third wave of Modernist and late Modernist writers post the British Poetry Revival, finding himself influenced by structuralism in the 1980s. His work reveals a shape-shifting faculty seen in his doubling and mirroring as in *Harriot Double* (2016) or sudden transformations into new graphic structures as in ‘Screen Seen: Reduction’ from *Le Fanu*.

Gavin's poetry is often one of sudden displacement, transition, gear-changes and other shifts. Ian MacFadyen kicks off his contribution here with morphing visions of womanhood: ‘She shapeshifts from shopgirl to showgirl, from street to stage, catwalk to screen.’ Gavin quotes Thomas Sheridan's *Art of Punning* with obvious fascination: ‘Rule 14. *The Rule of Transition*: Which will serve to introduce any thing that has the most remote relation to the subject you are upon.’ ‘Briny Shifts’ from *Harriot Double* rearranges passages in Chapman's *Odyssey*. In ‘Fire’, Ian Brinton

evokes bizarre and surreal changes: 'fire shifts like an amoeba as well as like a giraffe'. These transitions are also realised in the paratextual materiality of Gavin's books, as in his carefully-configured and gold-leaf burnished cover for *Tilting Square*, R.B. Kitaj's pastel and charcoal drawing on the cover of *Roxy*, Alan Halsey's cover and lettering for *Azimuth*, the Brinsley Le Fanu picture on the cover of *Le Fanu's Ghost* and also in its deep green endpapers and holographic images, the whole volume masterfully designed by Glenn Storhaug.

Gavin's activities in fostering poetry have never been limited to his mainstream literary output; his series of *Riverside Interviews* published by Binnacle, such as the volume on Jerome Rothenberg (1984) and his occasional festschrifts for his friends such as his *Epithalamion on the marriage of Geraldine Monk & Alan Halsey* (1998) reveal an interest in nurturing international ties and friendships in the arts.

Words from Peter Middleton's essay included here recounting his first meetings with Gavin are indicative:

He was generous, Elizabethan, Olsonian, enthusiastically immersed in writing and reading poetry, interviewing poets and producing lengthy Binnacle Press booklets, collecting bootleg tapes, and recommending the best of the song lyricists. He introduced me to the 10,000 Maniacs.

That generosity and conviviality are familiar to so many writers gathered here. In his sartorial jackets, sometimes bright shirts and trademark hats, with raffish moustache (sometimes askew with amusement), smile and piercing eyes, Gavin has brought colour to a myriad of literary scenes: a poet on the hoof, liaising, introducing, supporting so many among the different reading venues, pubs, universities, theatres, concert halls and streets, particularly in London but elsewhere too.

There is of course, another side to Gavin: the poet as secret observer and private eye taking it all in, a fan of British Noir films' mystery and enigma. Accompany him in person or follow his writing down any city street and he will open out its secrets and hidden histories: for example the London pubs and hideaways of Dylan Thomas, Julian Maclaren-Ross and Humphrey Jennings.

As many writers comment here, Gavin is also an unashamedly serious and learned author and avid bibliophile with his personal library of perhaps 45,000 books. He has a huge collection of Golden Age detective fiction

and the pride and joy of his library is *Camden's Britannia* (first edition in English, 1610). It is worth pausing to compare this in terms of scale with Umberto Eco's collection of 30,000-plus books acquired recently by the Italian Culture Ministry.

In this volume, you will find recollections and poems, visual homages, photographs and essays, interviews and precious hard-to-find items like Ian McMillan's *Shadowtrain* review of *Music's Duel*. Andrew Duncan, David Hackbridge Johnson and Lyndon Davies discuss the poet's love of music. There is discussion of his explorations of Surrealist paintings. Robert Hampson brings in Gavin's affinity with cinema, theatre, architecture and fashion. Mandie Wright writes of their shared interest in folk song. Yet this is no place to pre-empt the pleasure of discovering this book for yourselves. Our thanks to all the contributors for giving so generously of their time, to journal editors for permitting the reprinting of rare articles and to Gavin himself for his invaluable help in compiling this volume.