Roy Fisher was born in Handsworth, Birmingham, in 1930. Until he took early retirement recently he had worked most of his life in higher education – in English and Drama at Bordesley College of Education and then in American Studies at the University of Keele. What fame he now has is of a paradoxical kind: he is famous for having been largely ignored. Until Oxford University Press published his *Poems 1955–1980* when he was fifty, he had been published only by small presses, most of them now defunct – Migrant Press, Tarasque Press, Northern House, Fulcrum Press.

He continued to be ignored, moreover, despite the attempts of Donald Davie and Eric Mottram to promote him in the early seventies. Both wrote pioneering essays that attempted to explain his work by placing it in context: what perhaps did not help was that they had radically opposed views of what that context actually was.

Davie’s essay is the more eccentric of the two. He attributes Fisher’s neglect to the fact that there are in literary England two distinct circles or systems of literary activity and literary reputation, and there is a sometimes rancorous rivalry between them. He takes Philip Larkin as an example of one “system” and Fisher as an example of the other and deplores the assumption that no-one can like equally Roy Fisher, who writes in free verse and in open forms, and Larkin, who characteristically uses closed forms and writes in meter. Davie’s essay amounts to a plea on Fisher’s behalf to what he calls the ‘establishment’ (the system that supports Larkin) and his strategy is to suggest that “Fisher and Larkin are very much alike” and that Fisher’s “temperament is, like Larkin’s, profoundly Hardyesque” (Davie, 154).

Opposing a paradox with a platitude is a risky business, but I want to explore what I take to be Fisher’s uncompromising modernism and this seems to me to make him a very different poet.
from either Larkin or Hardy. There may be some temperamental affinities between the three poets – they are all sceptics whose writings dwell repeatedly on an English landscape; in the case of Hardy and Fisher these revisitings become a kind of reality-testing, or a search for stability and certainty. Fisher’s scepticism, however, extends to the literary medium itself and this results in his deployment of a wide range of techniques that suggest the distortiveness and complexity of the medium, its tendency to place reality at several removes; it results, also, in his avoidance of narrative and discursive writing. This is reflected, moreover, in his forms – in his characteristically tentative free verse rhythms and his open and fragmented structures. By contrast, Davie’s contention that Fisher is “profoundly Hardyesque” implies that Fisher’s forms are a kind of disguise that conceals the real nature of his subject-matter.

In this respect Fisher’s affinities have always been with European and American modernism, and Mottram’s essay was more accurate in pointing this out – although by mentioning so many names in locating Fisher he may have crowded him out of the picture altogether (Mayakovsky, Eliot, Lorca, Dos Passos, De Chirico, Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, William Carlos Williams, Edward Burra, Wyndham Lewis, Whitman, Beckett, Robert Duncan, Zukofsky, Olson, Duchamp, Cage, Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, Borges, Oldenberg, Lichtenstein, Lundquist, Tzara, Creeley and Tony Hancock). These names do have a collective relevance, but the length of the list and its exotic appearance ultimately suggest the difficulty of the battle Mottram was fighting in the face of a poetry-reading public with mostly parochial and anti-modernist tastes.

Davie’s essay contains much that is illuminating and its importance in drawing attention to Fisher was enormous. Its central thesis, however, cannot help a reader to understand Fisher’s most characteristic work. In this way it represents a more sophisticated version of the kind of attention Fisher has received when he has not been neglected – a kind of attention that wants to turn him into a different poet. This was what Fisher was lamenting in an interview in 1973 when he referred to the disproportionate amount of attention given to his poem “The Entertainment of War”:

I’ve written at least one simple narrative poem about some of my relatives getting killed in an air-raid. It’s the thing most untypical of anything I believe about poetry that I ever wrote. But it’s the poem which has been most reprinted, and which people remember