Articles

Robert Hampson

Border-crossing

Border-crossing: These deaths are not inevitable

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Abstract

This article is situated in my own work in poetry. It falls into two parts: the first takes off from my own work to explore different practices of bordering; the second part continues that exploration by reference to recent work by Caroline Bergvall and Jeff Hilson. The first section explores my sequence, ‘the war against tourism’. These poems were written between December 2003 and July 2006 in the environment created by the US Patriot Act 2001 and the Homeland Security Act 2002. The Homeland Security Act both foregrounded the protection of borders and introduced ‘homeland’ into US political discourse. The first section will focus on my sequence of site-specific poems (written on flights), which explore ‘homeland security’, refugees, terrorism, profiling, border interrogations and identity. It will consider border-crossings and how identity figures in these poems in the context of mobility. The second section, ‘these deaths are not inevitable’, focuses on Caroline Bergvall’s volume *Drift* and its engagement with the ‘left-to-die’ boat within a longer history of migration by sea, going back to the Anglo-Saxons bringing their culture to Britain in the fifth century. The article concludes with a brief examination of Jeff Hilson’s conceptual poem, ‘A Final Poem with Full Stops’, and how deaths in the Mediterranean relate to recent treatment of borders, refugees and migrants.

Keywords

borders and bordering

refugees

poetry

security

migration

identity

The article that follows is concerned with different practices of bordering from the mundane and routine (identity checks and security clearances) to the more obviously brutal and dehumanizing (involving the deaths of refugees by neglect or physical violence). The first part focuses on a sequence of my own poems in which I drew on experiences of international travel (more specifically, all were site-specific works, written during flights) to explore border-crossings and related issues; the second part examines more recent poetry by Caroline Bergvall and Jeff Hilson responding to the current treatment of refugees and migrants. My own poems derive from travel experiences that the sequence’s overall title categorizes as ‘tourism’ (though most of the trips could equally be categorized as ‘business’), but there is a continuity between these poems and the work by Bergvall and Hilson in so far as all explore the creation and maintenance of borders by state apparatus and the resulting disempowerment of people through the imposition of different categories and through symbolic and physical violence. There is a continuity between the forced opening of the tourist’s suitcase with which my sequence starts and the violence directed at migrants and refugees; the sequence constantly gestures towards a world of intimate ‘physical inspection’, ‘random searches’, hooding and physical torture, racial profiling and the routinizing of these practices. The article concludes with the sample of my own poems that I have discussed.

The war against tourism

Although it is not part of the sequence of poems I want to discuss, which were collected as ‘the war against tourism’, I want to begin with another poem written during a flight, ‘flying american’ (Hampson 2001). This was written in the 1990s, in response to reading Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, during a flight to the United States. Indeed, the first draft is written in the blank pages at the back of my edition. Like the later poems, this responds to something I am reading while incorporating elements from the immediate environment. I am beginning with this poem because it demonstrates clearly the poetic practices implicit in the more recent sequence. Bhabha’s opening statement that ‘we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion’ (1994: 1) was already richly resonant as I settled in my seat. His continuation – that we need ‘to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences’ (Bhabha 1994: 1) provided one kind of permission for the poem that followed – with its focus on moments and processes rather than narratives of subjectivity. His citation of the African American artist Renée Green (‘[m]y work has a lot to do with a kind of fluidity, a movement back and forth, not making a claim to any specific or essential way of being’; Bhabha 1994: 3) provided another: in this case, for the fluidity of the syntax and instability of grammatical forms (where words like ‘BUCKLE’ function as noun or verb and formulations like ‘to see the / SCREEN’ can start or end sentences and, as a result, change their grammatical subject).1 Although it is very far from the urgencies of Pepon Osorio’s ‘migrant act of survival’, the poem does work to create, register or uncover a ‘hybrid cultural space’ (Bhabha 1994: 7) from the transnational fusion of food and drink and the (implicit) diverse trajectories of the aircraft’s passengers (‘O FLORIDA’). It registers the cultural complexities of the non-place of flight and anticipates the moment of dispersal of the aircraft’s passengers, the moment when these varied trajectories encounter the state apparatus of borders (‘the / GATE’). It also registers, by comparison with the later sequence, a change in the experience of international travel between the 1990s and the following decade: the flight provides a utopian space of fluid identity and the enjoyment of hybrid potentiality, which stands in contrast to the anxieties and dystopian vision of the later poems.

The sequence of poems ‘the war against tourism’ was written between December 2003 and July 2006.2 The poems were written in the environment created by the US Patriot Act (2001) and the Homeland Security Act (2003). Indeed, the initial impetus for the sequence was provided by Homeland Security itself: the first poem (‘homeland security’) was based on the text left in my suitcase by Homeland Security after a flight from Los Angeles (the lineation was mine).3 The poem registers the assertion of power – and the corresponding production of powerlessness in the addressee – embodied in the text of the official document. It teases at the force of those repeated ‘mays’. ‘We may have been forced / to break the locks’, but who ‘forced’ them to ‘break the locks’? This presumably refers to the surrounding situation of anti-terrorist emergency measures, but it has a trace of blaming the victim for locking their suitcase. ‘We may not accept claims’ offers the momentary glimpse of the alternative possibility (‘[w]e may accept claims’) before closing that down with the appeal to an unchallengeable and unnamed higher power (‘there’s no right of recourse’). Selection for ‘physical inspection’ flashes up a threat of another kind, while the apparent assertion of gratitude (‘we appreciate your cooperation’) contains within it another threat for those unwilling to ‘cooperate’. As with other poems in the sequence, these lines are intended to resonate more widely with the power-laden encounter of border-crossings.

Where the initial poem was a found text, subsequent poems in this sequence were written under the constraint that they had to respond to the cabin-crew’s articulation of safety measures at the start of the flight and had to incorporate elements of that briefing into the poem. The sequence was ended when the United States announced that armed air marshalls would be present on flights: not only was I conspicuous by listening intently to these instructions, but I was also obviously taking notes. The first poem in the sequence (‘BA0434’) clearly takes off from the safety briefing, but it uses the safety briefing to engage with the simultaneous assertion of threats to ‘the homeland’ and the encouragement to ‘keep calm’ in the face of the various measures being taken: to trust this authoritative voice and focus on your personal comfort (‘make yourself comfortable’). In this case, the measures being taken include preparation for war and the overthrow of foreign governments. (The poem ‘BA0434’ was written in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq; Saddam Hussein was executed in December 2006.)

The second poem (‘BA0464’) begins with a newspaper report of anti-crime or anti-terrorism measures and suggests how, through a process of desensitization, we come to accept these as ‘routine procedures’ – like working out in a gym or submitting to (old-school) school punishment. The instruction to ‘leave all personal belongings’ in case of an accident segues into memories of films of refugees (in this case, particularly Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis) and the destruction of Palestinian homes by the Israeli Defence Force, although the poem deliberately does not restrict itself to particular examples. Again, the poem pushes at what is accepted as ‘routine’ and works to re-sensitize through dislocation and juxtaposition.

A later poem in the sequence (‘BD0717’) addresses ‘the law of unintended consequences’ – initially in the context of foreign policy and the limited efficacy of occupying armies. Among the unintended consequences of the invasion of Iraq, according to a US National Intelligence Council report of 2005, were the creation of both a recruitment stimulus for a new generation of insurgents and a training ground for these new recruits to develop and enhance military skills. There was recruitment to al-Qaeda, who had previously been kept out of Iraq by Saddam Hussein, and also increased recruitment for the Mujahadeen, the product of an earlier experiment in US intervention in Afghanistan. The ‘unintended consequences’ also included the death and displacement of the Iraqi population: by 2017, the number of people displaced from Iraq was estimated at 3.3 million (UNHCR 2017: 6). The poem, however, turns its attention to the anticipation of various aircraft emergencies, where the intense focus on the body and body-parts serves to engage with the fragility of the human body. A subsequent poem (‘BA2602’) addresses another kind of fragility, the human body as the object of surveillance and bureaucratic control. As in other parts of this sequence, by using the context and language of the safety briefing (which most passengers ignore), the poem registers both the perceived necessity for random checks and profiling as part of anti-terrorist security measures and also the dangers of inattention; of simply accepting legal changes around borders and border-crossings as routine procedures. However, as suggested above, the poems also aim to bring in wider historical and political contexts. The poems are written largely in response to British and US foreign policy – in particular, the Iraq invasion of 2003 and its aftermath. In addition, though these poems are written by a professional white male from the comfort and security of regular commercial flights taken for business or tourist purposes, they have an engagement with mobility and border-crossings that begins to speak to current issues around borders, refugees and migration. Bergvall’s *Drift* addresses more directly the experiences of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean.

These deaths are not inevitable

On 27 March 2011, between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. Libyan time, a rubber dinghy with 72 migrants on board left Tripoli. They proceeded in the direction of the Italian island of Lampedusa for some fifteen to eighteen hours, but then ran out of fuel and began to drift. Their distress call was picked up and their position determined by GPS: this information was sent to all ships in the area. At that time, the whole region was heavily monitored by the NATO-led coalition which was intervening in Libya. Since March 23, NATO had been enforcing an arms embargo off the Libyan coast: as a result, there were some 38 ships engaged in this NATO activity together with helicopters and various forms of electronic surveillance. The migrants’ vessel had contact with fishing boats, helicopters and one military vessel, but, contrary to the law of the sea, nobody came to their assistance. On April 10, the ship landed again at Zlitan, southeast of Tripoli: only eleven of the original 72 passengers were still alive – and two of these died shortly after landing. The story of the ‘left-to-die’ boat has been made known through the artists Forensic Architecture and their Forensic Oceanography project.4 Forensic Architecture describe this project as a ‘strategic repurposing of surveillance technologies’. They were able to use the information generated through surveillance into evidence of responsibility for the alleged crime of non-assistance. As their website notes, they were able to detourn the information produced by surveillance and use their ‘disobedient gaze’ to unveil the violence of the border regime.

In 2014, Caroline Bergvall published *Drift.* This began life as a multi-media performance piece, commissioned by Gru / Transtheatre, Geneva, in 2012, with percussion from Ingar Zach and visual art from Thomas Köppel, who produced an electronic backdrop of drifting words forming landmasses, performing the migration, disintegration and reconstruction of language. At this stage, Bergvall was aiming to explore ‘the archaic, tribal traffic between voice and drum, between text and beat, air and skin, voice and breathing’ (2014: 128). It had its UK premiere at Southend’s Shorelines Festival of the Sea in November 2013, and then it had a series of seven performances, organized by Penned in the Margins, across various venues in England in 2014. It was presented as an installation of prints, sound work and digital algorithmic collage at Callicoon Fine Arts in New York during January–February 2015.

At the core of *Drift* are two narratives: the first inspired by the Anglo-Saxon poem, ‘The Seafarer’; the second, Forensic Architecture’s uncovered narrative of the ‘left-to-die’ boat. ‘The Seafarer’, with its narrative of exile, maritime migration and the hardships of life at sea, was famously translated into an Anglo-Saxon-inflected English by Ezra Pound.5 As Hugh Kenner noted, Pound was particularly interested in mapping the sound of the original (1975: 351). In *Drift*, Bergvall is not interested in offering an accurate translation of the original poem but rather in responding to its sonic and lexical aspects, working through associations, homophones, ‘false friends’ and etymological explorations to produce three sequences (sixteen ‘Songs’, eight poems called ‘North’ and eight called ‘Hafville’), with the sixteen ‘Songs’ wrapped around the other two sequences. The first three songs take off from the opening lines of the Anglo-Saxon poem to set up the sufferings of the seafarer, alone on a wintry sea. The next eight poems, ‘North’, draw on various accounts of early medieval voyages – such as the thirteenth-century Vinland Sagas, which relate Norse voyages to Greenland and North America. These early accounts of navigation are overlaid with other northern journeys from the search for the Northwest Passage to taking the wrong branch of the London Underground Northern Line. ‘Hafville’, which Bergvall describes as a Norse word for being lost at sea (‘see wilderness, sea wildering’; Bergvall 2014: 153), is the title for a sequence of poems which engage with the experience of being lost at sea, when the wind fails and the fog surrounds the ship so that ‘all reckoning’ is lost (Bergvall 2014: 44), where ‘reckoning’ gestures towards the navigational technique of dead reckoning, but also carries undertones of a more general power of reasoning. Appropriately enough, in this sequence, language first stutters, then falls apart on the page, registering the disorienting experience of the seafarer through its own damage. The final thirteen ‘Songs’ imbricate early medieval voyages with other voyages, from Odysseus in the Mediterranean through to more recent seafarers (‘I have lost all my papers’; Bergvall 2014: 48).

The overall effect of these three sequences is not so much an account of a history of sea-voyages as a mesmeric multilayered experience of maritime navigation that is also the experience of the excavation of a language that is freighted with its own history of sounds, meanings and movements. They register both the historical importance of sea-voyages and the historical migrations of people and languages. ‘The Seafarer’ has been read as not simply the reminiscences of a man alone at sea, but a spiritual quest.6 This part of *Drift* can also be read through Bergvall’s description of ‘The Seafarer’ as providing ‘a template for tackling the painful obtuse persistence of the unfolding events in my life’ (2014: 152). On the one hand, Bergvall’s exploration of Anglo-Saxon through modern Norwegian and Old Norse reflects her own complex situation in language: born in Norway, educated in Paris, resident in London. In earlier works, such as *Éclat* (1996) and *Goan Atom* (1999), Bergvall joyfully exploited slippages between English and French in a display of exuberant linguistic jouissance. *Drift* is part of a more recent interrogation of her relation to Norway. In *Drift*, this interrogation is conducted through the exile narrative of ‘The Seafarer’, but the sense of homelessness (which is most powerfully present in the ‘Hafville’ poems) also relates to another narrative, hinted at in the volume, beginning with the end of one relationship and ending with the beginning of another.

The middle section of *Drift*, ‘Report’, takes us into quite different territory. In white print on black pages, Bergvall baldly reproduces the narrative uncovered by the Forensic Architecture Report. In a series of short, emotionally neutral paragraphs, Bergvall recounts the unwilling departure of the 72 migrants in a dinghy designed to carry 25 people; the slow progress of the boat towards Lampedusa; the sighting of the boat by a French aircraft, which fixed its position; the boat running short of fuel (no food or water had been provided for the voyage); the distress message sent by Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Rome to all ships in the area; the arrival and departure of a helicopter with English writing on the side; the attempt to approach fishing boats; the drifting of the dinghy among high waves and the first deaths; the encounter with a military vessel; and then the final drifting back to the Libyan coast. Even this, however, was not the end of their sufferings: the ten survivors were given water by the army and taken to prison, where they spent three days without food. Bergvall’s narrative lets these details speak for themselves: the enforced setting to sea in an inappropriate vessel, inadequately fuelled and without food and water; the various forms of surveillance of the boat and encounters with it, but no attempt made to help; and ‘the callous, brutal politics’ (*Drift*, p. 135), which began when the migrants were forced into the boat and ended with the survivors undergoing imprisonment. Bergvall’s subjective account of various sea-voyages in the ‘Seafarer’ section of *Drift* fills in some of the silences and reticence of ‘Report’. She does not speak for the migrants on the ‘left-to-die’ boat, but she draws on others’ personal accounts of suffering at sea in earlier literature.

Coda: A final poem with full stops

I want to end with another recent poem which engages with the mistreatment of migrants and refugees: Jeff Hilson’s ‘A Final Poem with Full Stops’ (2017a, 2017b). Hilson’s source for the poem’s epigraph (‘These deaths are not inevitable’) is the Amnesty International report, *The Human Cost of Fortress Europe*. This is a report on the human rights violations against the thousands of migrants and refugees who try to reach Europe each year. Already in 2014, Amnesty was reporting how the EU member states had ‘constructed an increasingly impenetrable fortress to keep irregular migrants out’, many of these fleeing persecution or conflict (Amnesty International 2014: 5). In addition to the funding for surveillance systems and the financial support for strengthening the borders in Bulgaria and Greece, migrants and refugees were being mistreated by border guards and coast guards and illegally expelled without access to asylum procedures (Amnesty International 2014: 5). As a result of these measures, men, women and children are drowning at sea, suffocating in the backs of trucks, trapped in countries such as Libya, Morocco and Turkey (Amnesty International 2014: 6).

Hilson’s long poem consists of a series of words and phrases, punctuated (as his title suggests) by full stops. It begins:

suicide. suicide by drowning or suicide by hanging. suicide by jumping off a bridge. & died. roma. died or killed. died in a fire. died jumping from a train. & drowned. reportedly. run over by a car reaching the Italian beach. & drowned. roma. drowned in the river trying to cross the border […]

His source is clearly a report or reports on the death of migrants and refugees. The ‘full stops’ are not just the method of punctuation; they are also these premature deaths: the suicides, the accidents (because of the dangers of the journeys undertaken), the murders. The recurrence of the term ‘Roma’ recalls the documentation of reasons for arrest in the third Reich. Another recurrent item, ‘no name’, emphasizes the de-humanization these migrants have undergone. In performance, this lengthy litany is a precise and powerful reminder of the human cost of the border policies, and the treatment of migrants and refugees, outlined in the Amnesty report.

**flying american**

     4 clemmie nettlefold

push back

ground control

into the

BUCKLE

six miles

high sluggish

SYNAPSES

after pink

CHAMPAGNE

the missing

link in the

NARRATIVE

lunch brings

chicken pizza

HYBRIDITY

high-tec horizon

TURBULENCE

behind an

ORANGE

fashion shirt

O FLORIDA

perched on

a pile of

CUSHIONS

to see the

SCREEN

just join

up the

dots to

reach the

GATE

**homeland security**

we may have been forced

to break the locks

we sincerely regret

if things go wrong

mark damaged areas

& check the small print

we may not accept claims

& there is no right of recourse

for those selected

for physical inspection

we appreciate your cooperation

**BA0434**

pushback safety briefing

for defending the homeland

keep those lapstraps fastened

along the Essex coast

all the manpower required

for a medium-sized war

virtually ready

masks like this

near the end

of its shelf-life

ripples in the air

the capital captured

& government overthrown

make yourself comfortable

**BA0464**

subject to random searches

basketball games & working out

in the gym 2 hours per day

one hand over the other

offered up for correction

these are routine procedures

leave all personal belongings

except what can be carried

in a single suitcase

you’ve seen the movies

shovels picks & chainsaws

maybe a bulldozer over the family home

**BD0717**

lifts the flap on the buckle

the new world disorder

or the law of unintended consequences

the occupying army controls

only what it can shoot

pull the mask towards you

already you begin to lose

the borders of your identity

pull it over your head

how do you locate yourself

take up the protective brace position

with both feet flat on the floor

& 24,000 feet beneath you

We’ll know where to find your teeth

**BA2602**

random swoops

progressively introduced

wising up to

elegantly cross-cut

itineraries

clearly marked

by skin colour

& accents

adjusted &

unfastened

they appear

automatically

breathe normally

using the mouthpiece

& cross-check

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Notes

1. Bhabha discusses Green’s site-specific work, *Sites of Genealogy*, which ‘displays and displaces the binary logic through which identities of difference are often constructed’ (1994: 3).

2. They were collected with three other sequences, ‘Reworked Disasters’, ‘Bugsplat’ and ‘Other Thefts’ in *Reworked Disasters* (Hampson 2013).

3. This poem was chosen as one of the ‘Highly Commended Poems of 2013’ by the judges of the Forward Prize for that year. See *The Forward Book of Poetry* (2014: 87).

4. This project was launched in the summer of 2011. Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani and SITU Research were particularly involved. See www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat. I am indebted to this site for the information in the preceding paragraph.

5. Pound translated the first 76 lines. He left out the latter part of the poem, which offers an allegorical reading of the sea-narrative as a spiritual journey, as what he called the addition of ‘a monk with literary ambitions’. It was first published in the weekly, *New Age*, in November 1911.

6. The religious language in the latter part of the poem has encouraged these readings.

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