

DEAD IRAQIS

SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF ELLIS SHARP

Edited with an Introduction by Macdonald Daly

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Dead Iraqis: Selected Short Stories of Ellis Sharp
by Ellis Sharp.

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INTRODUCTION

It was the summer of 1991. I had just completed a doctorate on D. H. Lawrence and Marxist criticism and, while my travels in the byways of Soviet anti-aesthetics seemed somehow not to have blunted my enthusiasm for the revolutionary doctrine, I was in thorough emotional revolt against all narratives modernist and realist. I was thus somewhat demob-happy and uniquely susceptible to the seductions of a fiction that combined radical Marxism with postmodernist aesthetics, had such a paradoxical thing existed, which I was fairly confident it did not. That was before I encountered a thin yellow book whose spine jutted out further than the others on the fiction shelf of a Glaswegian second-hand bookshop. This jutting out was a sure sign of a small press publication done in A5 dimensions, an ungainly size for a book of fiction, but one at least (like their cheap duotone covers) that allowed these semi-professional rarities easily to be detected.

This specimen was called *The Aleppo Button*, was published by Malice Aforethought Press, and contained thirteen stories by one Ellis Sharp, in 110 pages.¹ Despite my usual experience of disappointment with small press publications (whose professional shortcomings – almost invariably poorly edited, often amateurishly typeset, usually containing multitudes of howling linguistic and typographical errors – tend to be matched by writing to which, at best, one can be only aesthetically indifferent), this one instantly got me where it mattered: it opened with a tall tale, which I read in its entirety on the spot, standing there in the bookshop, in which Joseph Stalin did not die on 5 March 1953, but faked his decease, swam to England, and by 1957 “was a familiar figure on the promenade at Bognor”. Indeed, so popular did Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili prove with the West Bognor Conservative Association, and so prized was his “personal knowledge of the horrors of

¹ Ellis Sharp, *The Aleppo Button* (London: Malice Aforethought Press, 1991).

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Seychellism”, that he became the local MP (“the previous MP having disappeared off the pier one foggy evening”), although he did feel obliged to enlarge the list of aliases drawn upon in his Russian period (Koba, Ivanovich, Gayoz Nisharadze, K. Cato, Chizhikov, Vassil, Stalin itself) by changing his name to Julian Iron.

The story (reproduced on pp. 54-61 of the present collection) was a hoot – written with great tonal poise, linguistically complex, and confidently taking the imbecile thematic liberties of all great satire – but its idiosyncratic killer touch, for me, was that it seemed to be as well versed as I was in the recondite details of Stalin’s insane life and showed a brilliant awareness of the comic potential in much Soviet history, something that any humourful student of the subject soon comes to appreciate. As I have intimated, the author could not have hoped for a more ideal reader: indeed, having bought the book and devoured it later that day at one sitting, I had a peculiar sense, which can surely only happen once or twice in a lifetime, that the book had been written especially for me.

Or perhaps I should say *half the book*. I have in this astringently sifted selection retained four of *The Aleppo Button’s* thirteen stories, although I could quite easily, on grounds of quality, have included two or three more, such as “Dead Paraguayans” (a forerunner to the later story which gives the present selection its title) and the manic monologic lecture of “The Aleppo Button” itself. The stories which I disfavour – and for me this will emerge as a general rule in relation to Sharp’s fiction, as well as being a principle of selection to which I have largely adhered in putting together this volume – tend to be the shorter squibs in which, although all his typical verbal pyrotechnics are there to be enjoyed, narrative is thin or non-existent, and one has the feeling that his imagination has not been allowed the full obsessive rein it seems to display when in the throes of spinning a yarn. Sharp is generally at his best, despite the seeming aesthetic monstrosity of his consistent and explicit

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coupling of fiction with dogmatic politics, when he allows himself to do something as traditional as to unfold a story at leisure. He would perhaps eschew my preference for his more “readerly” stories – and I hope that readers of this volume will go back to the original volumes and test that preference for themselves – but, for me, Sharp at his most memorable is not the author of two-page streams of consciousness or brief propagandistic philippics, many instances of which can be found in the five volumes of tales I have here cannibalised. *The Aleppo Button* has several examples of both “writerly” and “readerly” texts, and likewise announces most of the literary techniques and thematic preoccupations Sharp was to pursue throughout the coming decade. The typical Sharp story of the 1990s is usually some kind of blistering critique of mainstream (Conservative, Labour or Liberal) politics, or of fascist or Stalinist barbarism, or a frankly partisan promotion (laced with a seemingly alien wild humour) of either classic Marxist ideology or Leninist-Trotskyite *praxis*. But critique and promotion alike are conducted by means of grotesque Swiftian narration and the deployment of a welter of literary devices as far removed from realism (socialist or otherwise) as could be imagined, all served up in a prose style that glories in the delights, slipperiness, precision and poeticism of the English language.

It is no coincidence to me that the longest story in *The Aleppo Button*, “Dobson’s Zone” – which fantastically relates the narrator’s intermittent connections with his friend Dobson, who exhibits a ragbag of incommensurable obsessions which he somehow tries to synthesise (namely the Loch Ness monster, the paramilitary career of Che Guevara, and crop circles) – is also my favourite, not least because one passage in it (pp. 16-17 below) explicitly foregrounds what more narrowly conceived political fiction tends to ignore, the necessary magic of words on which the entire enterprise of creative writing, even political fiction, depends:

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On our last evening together, drinking whisky, and then more whisky, and then yet more, I have never forgotten how we came (whose idea was it — his or mine? I no longer remember) to open up his Thesaurus at random, selecting quite arbitrarily a single, humble word, and chuckling as our fingers promiscuously roamed back and forth across the pages, up and down, between and below, touching every inch and scrap, every glorious, throbbing vowel and consonant and crackling, pulsating fiery connotation, until at last, drenched in sweat, half-drunk, utterly fatigued by our endeavours, we tumbled into a wordless, innocent and dreamless sleep. Ah, what it is to bathe in language, to cavort there, unashamed, ecstatic, up to the very ceiling of one's mind in beauty and resonance, drifting and gliding amid the harmonic choruses, the plangent chords, hearing the sweet hum of pluralism, soaring across the dazzling ranges of multiplicity, then falling, falling, dizzy, satiated, drained and drowsy, soothed by excess of meaning! (Chess, by contrast, has always struck me as rather a bore.)

When Dobson sets out to “manufacture a mystery” and thus achieve immortality, he does so with a programmatic awareness of *form* rather akin to this love of the workings of language: “for a hoax to be successful and to endure after the perpetrator’s death various essential ingredients were required”. The “zone” he goes on to describe turns out to be his invention, the inexplicable crop circle. However, it might equally well be a trope for Sharp’s fictional *oeuvre*: “It must, in short, provide a Z.C.F.M. — a ZONE for the CONVERGENCE of FECUND MULTIPLICITY” (p. 30).

Much of this “fecund multiplicity” is to be found in the flights of linguistic fancy into which any Sharp story is at any point liable to soar, sublimely, often without warning. “The Bloating of Nellcock”, for example, is a savage satire on the career of Neil Kinnock, then leader of the British Labour Party, who is depicted as a wind-filled Gargantua, a man masquerading as an immense balloon, met in so gas-engorged a condition that the story serves as the fuse which

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precipitates his imminent momentous explosion. Nellcock's bloatedness is a metaphor for Kinnock's linguistic bombast, which, fittingly enough, is described with a corresponding and carefully crafted fustian:

At the age of six his future as a deipnosophist seemed certain. Guzzling filched apples he loved to prattle. Hogging the pie he invariably piped up and rattled on. Devouring fried eggs and beans he became voluble, prolix. At puberty he used to perorate under the sheets. One day he became lost in a welter of subordinate clauses and did not return until dusk, panting and red-faced. At sixteen he loved nothing better than to rise to speak, ejaculating in full view of passers-by. How he spouted, shuddering! How he loved to stand on stumps, tuning his rant, oblivious to the pain of the amputees. (p. 44)

We are informed that “‘Bloater’ is found between ‘blitzkrieg’, which has one meaning, and ‘blob’, which has four or five” (pp. 48-9). The narrator, who is writing a book on Nellcock which he has yet to finish, enables himself to do so by following in action the logic of these lexical collocations: he carries out a fatal blitzkrieg on this particular blob by puncturing Nellcock with a harpoon, thus going considerably further in his treatment of his subject than either of Nellcock's previous biographers, who bear in their names (“Dunlop” and “Michelin”) their own complicity with his repellent inflatedness. Thus does Sharp make literary our common fantasies of political assassination, a theme to which he returns: a later story, “Nixon's Dog”, has the narrator blasting the corrupt American President to smithereens in 1962, long before he can assume office — and the year of the release of *The Manchurian Candidate*, the brainwashed-zombie-assassin movie which Nixon ironically urges the protagonist to see.²

² Ellis Sharp, *Lenin's Trousers* (London: Malice Aforethought Press, 1992), pp. 72-87.

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The present collection opens with one of the later stories in *The Aleppo Button*, “To the Wormshow”. It deserves its priority on account of its first sentence alone, which paradoxically makes it sound like the opening of an epic *Bildungsroman*: “My earliest memory?” But this is just one of the ways in which it succinctly exhibits the typical constituents of a Sharp story. For example, upon paradox there is heaped impossibility: the narrator’s earliest memory seems to be of the sensations experienced as an ejaculated spermatozoon – a successful one, as it necessarily turns out. Then there is the literary allusiveness which is penumbrally at work in nearly all of Sharp’s writing: the inspiration for this concise five page monologue is Laurence Sterne’s bloated *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), a text also narrated in the first person which likewise begins (and pretty much remains) temporally concerned with events before the hero’s birth, and is discoursing metaphorically about the spermatozoon (or “homunculus”) by its second page. Similarly, the narrator of “To the Wormshow” refuses to emerge from the womb until a protracted four and three quarter years after his conception in August 1945 or, in other words, for the entire duration of the post-war British Labour government.³ But this thematic

³ As ever, there is probably some Marxist sub-text at work, which readers are increasingly unlikely to recognise. In this case, it is Leon Trotsky’s immensely funny Darwinian characterisation of the Fabians: “English pigeon-fanciers, by a method of artificial selection, have succeeded in producing a variety by a progressive shortening of the beak. They have even gone so far as to attain a form in which the beak of the new stock is so short that the poor creature is incapable of breaking through the shell of the egg in which it is born. [...] Having been induced to enter the path of analogy with the organic world, which is such a hobby with [Ramsay] MacDonald, we may say that the political skill of the English bourgeoisie consists in shortening the revolutionary beak of the proletariat and thus preventing it from breaking through the shell of the capitalist state.” See Leon Trotsky, “Where is Britain

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politicisation of a literary device is itself taken over, at the end of the story, by a resumption of an intensified voice of satire, in this case the revelation of the young infant's first "actual" memory, served up in prose evoking nausea at and loathing for the world; these are the cadences and semantics of Swift once more. The style returns again and again in Sharp: reading for the first time the later "Dead Iraqis" or "The Henry James Seminar at My Lai" (pp. 109-116 and pp. 229-238 below respectively), one is probably feeling something similar to the appalled amazement of the original readers of Swift's "A Modest Proposal". It is this element of balance or, conversely, dynamism — between the often mistrusted rhetoric of a morally outraged Marxist politics and the more ambivalent and playful deployment of literary language and devices — that seems to me to distinguish Sharp's finer work.

In "Shooting Americans, with Emily", a story in Sharp's second collection, the narrator records the following anachronistic conversation with Karl Marx: "I remarked that whereas a writer's best book is always the first, a singer's best album is always the second. Marx immediately disproved this with references to Malcolm Lowry and Joni Mitchell" (p. 72 below). And it could be disproved by *Lenin's Trousers* itself: Sharp's second is also his best collection. Only because I wished to represent a broad range of Sharp's work across the 1990s have I reluctantly excluded from the present selection "Martina" (a story based entirely on a single typographical error), "Nixon's Dog" (even with its somewhat pat ending), and "Da-Da Vogt" (a furious obsessional monologue put into the mouth of Marx). *Lenin's Trousers* presents (though not exclusively) a number of "alternative histories", or engineered collisions between different ontological worlds, to employ some of the vocabulary then current in discussions of much "postmodern-

Going?" (1925), *Leon Trotsky on Britain* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), pp. 74-5.

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ist” fiction.⁴ So, in the winter of 1846, Emily Brontë bribed a girl from Haworth to impersonate her while she read a gun catalogue in a nearby cave. In the summer of the following year, “having made the final revisions to her manuscript”, she went to Liverpool, where she “disguised herself as a cabin boy and obtained employment on one of the vessels being used to transport British troops across the Atlantic”. She spent the rest of her life engaged in a guerrilla war, sniping at U.S. imperialists in Central America, eventually dying in her lover’s arms after a particularly heroic shoot-out. And here is the serious while absurdly comic feature of Sharp’s recycling of past cultural icons, lore and booty: unlike a great deal of postmodernist fiction, his intentions are consistently political in nature. What reader of *Wuthering Heights* has speculated, between chapters 9 and 10, that Heathcliff’s mysterious disappearing act may be explained in terms of a revolutionary sojourn such as that enjoyed by his creator in “Shooting Americans, with Emily”? But with knowledge of the latter, who could revisit Brontë’s novel without considering the possibility?⁵

The technique and its effects recall the superbly violent yoking together of heterogeneous legends we find, among others, in the earlier collocation of Che Guevara and the Loch Ness monster. Appropriation of revolutionary politics

⁴ See, for example, Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987).

⁵ Indeed, Heathcliff is missing for the climactic years of the American Revolutionary War and returns in September 1783, the year of its conclusion: “Have you been for a soldier?” is one of Nelly Dean’s first questions to him. He deliberately neglects to answer it. See Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 133. It has not escaped the present writer’s attention that this novel was first published under the pseudonym “Ellis Bell”, indicating, perhaps, a further dimension of allusion on our author’s part, just as his surname may involve a Sharp nod towards a Swift predecessor.

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for the purposes of absurd humour is ubiquitous in Sharp, but, rather than the knowing, nudging, trivialising iconoclasm which is a tic of much postmodernist narrative, the result seems to be exorcism of the earnestness, the deadly lack of play, which has ironically come to characterise much subversive politics. These stories don't seek to convert one to revolutionary causes, in the manner of propagandistic prose or socialist realist fiction, but rather draw attention to the failures of imagination, the excesses of solemnity, and the linguistic deadness which has hitherto accompanied almost all previous representations of such politics.⁶ Thus "Lenin's Trousers" (pp. 77-108 below) describes at great length how "there is not one Lenin but three Lenins that people write about" – 'Saint Lenin', 'Lenin the Monster' and 'Lenin the Revolutionary Socialist' – only to point out that "whichever of these three Lenins you happen to prefer, it is a fact that none of them showed any interest whatsoever in trousers". But by playing with the possibility of this interest a story gets told of the most unusual kind – and of course it also comically demonstrates, though not without a deep residue of seriousness, the important "materiality" of trousers compared to the negligible "idealism" of the prevalent characterisations of Lenin. *Cherchez l'étoffe*, one might say.

In "The Hay Wain" (pp. 117-47) we encounter the most concentrated and profound of Sharp's transformative appropriations, as well as the most serious in tone. This opens at noon in Manchester on 16 August 1819 with Jack Frake, a once-renowned Shakespearean actor, "hit one day in the street by a cart, bad leg injury, career in decline". Frake gets caught up in the Peterloo Massacre, kicks a soldier, and is spotted doing so by the yeomanry, which means he must

⁶ An earlier exception would be Martin Rowson's *Scenes From the Lives of the Great Socialists* (London: Grapheme, 1983), although, as a collection of cartoon drawings, this does little other than restore comedy to Marxism. The medium is not sophisticated enough to prompt any profounder response.

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run for his life and, wanted for high treason, “set his actor’s talents to work” in disguising himself and going underground. “A month later he’s in Norwich, three days later at Ipswich”, moving from bolthole to bolthole. Close to collapse, he finds “a white house, deep in mist”, and manages to conceal himself for a night in an empty box room at the top of it. “He wakes five hours later to the sound of housemartins chattering outside the window and a dull bronze glow over everything from the noonday sun. Goes to the window. Sees, over on the far bank, a man in his early forties, sat on a folding chair, reading a book. No, not reading a book. Holding a sketch pad and pen. Making two or three strokes, then pausing to look across the river. Looking right at Jack Frake.”

It is “almost noon”. The house, it turns out, is Willy Lott’s Suffolk home; the artist, John Constable. One commentator complains of the famous picture, “exhibited as *Landscape Noon* [it] is now so well known that ... it is ... never looked at, and its ‘novel look’ is taken for granted”.⁷ If Sharp’s dramatically contrived collocation of English labour history’s most notorious slaughter with English bourgeois art’s most popular idyll makes us look anew at the latter, it also makes it impossible to see in it what Cormack’s ideological purblindness makes out:

Here in the centre is, again, the focal point of the design, which consists of two horizontally opposed diagonals. One leads the eye over to the right to the haymaking, where the white shirts of the haymakers provide rhythmic accents on the horizon. [...] The white smock of the drover nearer at hand is balanced by the light tone of the horizon at mid-left, so that he does not leap out of the picture, but helps the movement into space in the opposite direction. The figures are simply blocked in, and their simple poses also help the timelessness of the scene. Constable, then, to [*sic*]

⁷ Malcolm Cormack, *Constable* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), p. 132.

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a boundless feeling for nature and twenty years' experience of close observation has created a work which is as pure as he can make it, a memory of his Suffolk home. *The Haywain* owes much of its lasting success to the feeling that in this "Idyllium", this image of "rustic life", "the essential passions of the heart speak a plainer and more emphatic language", as Wordsworth justified his own work in a different context, but we should not forget that, equally, even more than in his Hampstead Heath scenes, it also looks back to the high art of the seventeenth century and, in particular, to Rubens [...].⁸

The painting is appropriated here solely in the formal terms which allow it to be abstracted from any determining social context: consequently it is made to signify what is "balanced", "timeless", "boundless", "essential". But if to these qualities the painting "owes much of its lasting success", they are also precisely what cause it to be "never looked at", "taken for granted". For these attributes are so indefinite, so abstract, that they cannot *be* seen.

Nor (if one studies Constable's picture) can Jack Frake, or anything that could be mistaken for him. But no one who reads Sharp's text will look again at *The Haywain* without feeling that he is *there* – without the suspicion, indeed, that he has been *deliberately erased*. One does not *see* anything new *in* the picture: rather, one is made to *confront* it in an entirely different manner. For Frake the scene is anything but "timeless". He is wondering whether to "make a break for it" or "wait for dusk", temporal calculations based on a visual activity ("Frake glances wildly back out of the window") which is the reverse of contemplative. He suddenly hears dogs:

The cattle are gone, the ferryman's gone. The man with his sketchpad has folded up his little stool and is walking away

⁸ Cormack, p. 133.

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along the riverbank path. He's bent forward, holding up his trousers, the sketchpad half-slipping from beneath his arm as he tries to keep the turn-ups out of the mud. Undisturbed by the sound which rivets Frake's gaze to the yard, the ferocious barking, brutes on leashes, brutes with studded collars, straining, slavering excitedly, towing behind them as they burst from around the back of the house half-a-dozen grim, burly constables. As they move towards the doorway below the artist on the far bank disappears from view. Now all Frake can see is the ferryman, back where he was before, punting across a bowed labourer who holds a scythe. (p. 124)

Life-enhancing bucolicism, seen from one bank, becomes death when stared at from the other, for what else can the scythe-bearing labourer, accompanied by his Charon, represent? That Frake's end is meted out to the accompaniment of "the grunts and curses of the heavy constables" amid a knell of "hollow reverberating chimes of a nearby church ringing noon" intensifies the passage's marvellous, terrible resonance. One starts to detect traces of blood in Constable's *Landscape, Noon*.

"The Hay Wain" seems to me one of the most powerful ideological deconstructions to be found in contemporary fiction. One can detect in it a persistent aim of historical materialism, the exposure of the truth, in the words of Walter Benjamin, that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism".⁹ *The Haywain* is a "myth" ripe for dismantling, as Roland Barthes takes to pieces bourgeois culture and the western consumerism it serves in *Mythologies*. In "Wine and Milk" Barthes points out that French national euphoria over wine is so habitual that it seems "natural", and the economic basis of its production ("deeply involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1973), p. 258.

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settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread”) deliberately and outrageously ignored. To thus link seemingly innocent everyday pleasures with the barbarities of imperial conquest is, of course, to shatter them: “wine cannot be an unalloyedly blissful substance, except if we wrongfully forget that it is also the product of an expropriation”.¹⁰ The “unalloyed blissfulness” which *The Haywain* represents in English culture proves equally brittle when it is invaded by working class history.

But Sharp knows that there are proletarian myths as well as bourgeois ones. Peterloo (eleven dead) was a mere scrap by comparison with massacres on a modern scale: the vast magnitude of its *impact* on English radicalism routinely gets transferred to the event itself. But in a contemporary Britain in which the labour movement has been in retreat for three decades, such episodes from working class history have become mythological in a much more damaging sense than this: that is, the nostalgic and romantic celebration of them has come largely to replace radical political action in the present. But there is no such living in the past for Sharp. *The Haywain* does not, he knows, belong simply to the nineteenth century. It is permanently in process, an image in ideological circulation along with those produced today:

[...] a painting like *Top Gun*, all gloss, myth, fantasy. The judicious placement of flagpole or cart, runway or field, sunset or cloud, labourers or carrier in the Indian Ocean, until the two blur, and now that speck’s a MIG fighter, beyond the house lurks a blonde in leather, all sunlight and honey, in which there’s no place for agricultural depression, recession, squalor, poverty, the all-night wage slave, the women in the electronics factories of Korea, the tortured of Palestine, the black children with puffy bellies and skull

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 61.

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faces and big teardrop eyes, the masses blotted out by the sugar of individual destiny [...] (p. 139)

This is from the second section of “The Hay Wain” (Frake’s story occupies only eight of the story’s thirty-one pages), the action of which takes place on 31 March 1990, the date of “The Battle of Trafalgar Square” in which 200,000 Poll Tax protesters staged one of the most insurgent demonstrations witnessed in Britain within living memory.¹¹ Sharp’s roller-coaster description of this event is punctuated by “flashbacks” to historical disorders and protests (the Peasants’ revolt, the Blanketeers, Peterloo itself), thumbnail philippics aimed at Establishment icons whose statues are met *en route* by the marchers (Richard the Lion Heart, Cromwell, “Sir Winston Twister Dardanelles-Disaster dulled-by-brandy dago-hating [...] Churchill”, Earl Haig), and attacks on the media which have replaced Constable in providing reactionary representations of what is to be seen.

At the centre of this physical and textual vortex is Robinson, chased by the police into the National Gallery, who finds himself arrested, in more ways than one, before a familiar painting:

[...] much bigger than he’d imagined after seeing it all those times on biscuit tins and trays and calendars and hanging

¹¹ “The Hay Wain” is clearly indebted to *Poll Tax Riot: 10 Hours That Shook Trafalgar Square* (London: Acab Press, 1990), a virulently anarchistic pamphlet account of this demonstration, and itself a prose specimen worthy of study. There is a brilliantly surreal passage in “The Hay Wain” in which even the inanimate world becomes enlivened by the riot. A wooden chair suddenly appears “suspended in the air, about ten feet from the ground ... tilted, as if about to launch itself into battle. The chair bides its time, enjoying every moment” (p. 132). A photograph on p. 30 of the pamphlet depicts a chair, presumably hurled at the police by a protester, seeming to do just this.

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on the lounge wall of remote dusty relatives along with the Reader's Digest Condensed Novels and the 22" TV and the hideous china country maids and cherry-cheeked grinning shepherds [...] (p. 137)

He steps towards the canvas to read the gallery description of the painting ("represents a link between the idealism of Claude and Poussin, and the future empirical vision of the Impressionists") and the police assault him, flinging him against the canvas, his blood "spurting in a bright unreal slash across *The Hay Wain* by John Constable R.A." He spends the following moments in a new vision of art – "seeing for the first time a ghost in the murky water" – that mingles with a foreseeing of political corruption (the Coroner's evidence concluding that he perhaps vandalises the painting out of his anarchistic impulses). Thus, as well as putting "real" blood on the picture, does Sharp defuse in advance reactionary readings or critical "inquests" of his text. In the precise image, also, of a violent collision between present and past, and between conventionally different realms of discourse (art and politics in particular), we have the master trope of his fictional method.

While reading *Lenin's Trousers* I was revising an undergraduate course I taught in modern and contemporary English Literature, and I decided to make it the "up-to-the-minute" prescribed text which I usually nominated on the eve of the course.¹² I thought I had better check with the publishers that sufficient copies were available for a large class, and so I wrote to them. My enquiry must have been passed on, because a few days later I got a call from a man with what I considered a rather refined voice, who said, "Hello, I'm Ellis Sharp." If he was surprised that his obscure book had been so instantly acknowledged and prescribed on a Literature

¹² For the record, I seem to recall that Sharp's book left my students, with one or two enthusiastic exceptions, almost entirely baffled. Nearly all of them avoided writing about it. This was what I expected.

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course, he didn't sound it. I forget the brittle details of the call (just as I forget most of the detail of the three or four occasions on which we subsequently met) but the contact developed into a full-blown and very memorable correspondence — old style, printed on paper and sent through the post — his side of which occupies a large box file in my possession, another box file being occupied with publications, drafts and other literary (and much non-literary) material he forwarded. The correspondence extended over three or four years, on average at least once, sometimes twice a week, until Sharp — on paper a scintillating correspondent — became converted to email and our communications thereafter became briefer and more transactional, for reasons no more likely than the change of medium. It has been a curious friendship, conducted almost entirely through writing.

Its most unexpected consequence, for me, was that I ended up being co-author of Sharp's next book. I believe he had sent me drafts of stories about Nietzsche and Trotsky. Coincidentally, I had a story about Nietzsche tucked away in a drawer and I had recently published a satire involving Trotsky (the latter somewhat inspired, in fact, by the liberation of constraints I witnessed in Sharp's own stories). I sent him both and, as it ended up, we decided each to write two more stories involving hirsute mega-intellectuals, eventually choosing Engels and Freud. The resultant eight stories — each of us being sole author of four — was published as *Engels on Video*, so entitled because the year of publication, 1995, was also the centenary of Engels' death.¹³ All of the Sharp stories in the volume seem among his best to me — he was, I think, at the height of his confidence and consistency at this time — and I have represented the book here with his two longest contributions to it, the stories involving Nietzsche and Engels. We felt especially grateful to *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* for lacerating the book in

¹³ Mac Daly and Ellis Sharp, *Engels on Video: A Joint Production* (London: Zoilus Press, 1995).

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review: it was about the only periodical to bother.

Many of Sharp's letters to me detailed his ongoing and intensifying political activity, which seemed to oscillate between the *Socialist Worker* newspaper and direct action of an anarchist kind, such as that involved in the anti-roads protests. He was, for example, regularly involved in occupations of land made in the course of a campaign against the M11 link road development near his home in East London (the occupied territory became known as "Wanstonia"). I once turned up at his house in my modest Triumph Acclaim and his greeting was a quite curt (although objectively correct) instruction to me to move my car off the kerb. His letters crackled with anti-automobile static. *To Wanstonia*, the collection he published in 1996, occasionally fictionalises these political activities, particularly in the title story, which is an experimental attempt to document (though Sharply) the M11 protest, and the often hilarious "Scenes from the 39 Day Strike at Thrabb's". The collection on the whole, however, seems to me to lack the élan of Sharp at his best. For example, the stories sometimes repeat old formulas without improvement: the Jane Austen tale, "Spiders", is in some ways a repetiton of the earlier, better Emily Brontë story, just as "One Morning Twenty-Nine Carp Were Caught", which identity-switches Lenin and Chekhov, is excelled by "Tinctures, Stains, Relics", a story in *The Aleppo Button* which much more bizarrely swaps the lives of Karl Marx and Charles Fort (of *Fortean Times* fame). "Paper Heart (a story in three albums)" is included here largely to let the "stream-of-consciousness" side of Sharp's fiction be heard; the albums concerned are Bob Dylan's relatively obscure *Planet Waves* (1974), the double platinum *Desire* (1976), and the poorly received *Hard Rain* (1976). Still, the story doesn't really do it for me. But the collection continued to show Sharp capable of virtuoso performances, such as "A Rag", a story which poignantly revisits the scene of Antonioni's cult film *Blow-Up* (1966), and "The Henry James Seminar at My Lai", a text it is not wise to embark upon if

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one's sensibilities tend towards the comfortable.

In retrospect, I can now see that Sharp was always going off in a different direction from short fiction hereinafter. His stream-of-consciousness propensities (in contrast with his postmodernist leanings) had always seemed to me incapable of integration with his political obsessions in a satisfactory fictional form until I read *The Dump*, a slab of 50,000 paragraphless words, his first novel, written *à la* Samuel Beckett, a searing, grotesque parody of the Britain of the 1990s.¹⁴ Stream-of-consciousness needs that larger canvas, it would seem. Arguably his finest single work so far, *The Dump* nonetheless competes with *Unbelievable Things*, an exquisite 500-page-plus epic published a mere year later, which blends the English "country house" genre with such incommensurables as science fiction and, inevitably, the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁵ In 2007, in more out-and-out Philip K. Dick mode, appeared the slickly plotted *Walthamstow Central*.¹⁶

In the spaces between these three novels Sharp produced two further volumes of short fiction.¹⁷ But the swerve of direction is now clear. The texts in both books are very short, sometimes almost squibbish: narrative mostly yields to lyricism or contrived humour. I have ignored the collection of 2004 entirely, as it yields nothing to compete with the merit of any single text herein, and is rather marred by a nasty tale which glories in the wanton murder of a TV personality (my objection is aesthetic rather than ethical). But among *Driving My Baby Back Home's* stories of some substance there remain four which, for me, still demonstrate his powers in the short form, though on the wane – or perhaps, more correctly, on the wing. These four texts close this selection. The last words of the final story seem to me, in

¹⁴ Ellis Sharp, *The Dump* (London: Zoilus Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Ellis Sharp, *Unbelievable Things* (London: Zoilus Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Ellis Sharp, *Walthamstow Central* (London: Zoilus Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Ellis Sharp, *Driving My Baby Back Home* (London: Zoilus Press, 1999) and *Aria Fritta* (London: Zoilus Press, 2005).

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particular, in their epitaphic summing-up of a major element of Sharp's literary methods, an appropriate point at which to draw the curtain on his achievement in the short story.

It is very curious to write about an author whose talent is such that one considers he should have a large audience when, in fact, the number of those who appreciate his work is infinitesimally small. Of course Sharp's scalding up-front politics and the literary demands he makes on his readers will inevitably alienate him from a mass readership. But it has been my hope in preparing the present volume that it will prove to be a lasting introduction to a writer whose modicum of acknowledgment is long overdue. There is certainly no contemporary British writer quite like him.