

The Twist in the Plotting

Special Collections featured item for November 2009 by Peter Robinson, Professor of English and American Literature, University of Reading.

Bernard Spencer. *The Twist in the Plotting : twenty five poems*. Reading: Printed in the School of Art, University of Reading, 1960.

Item held in Reserve collection 821.914-SPE, University of Reading Special Collections Services.



Bernard Spencer (1909-1963) (*shown left*) was an important British poet who contributed to, and helped to edit Geoffrey Grigson's magazine *New Verse* through the second half of the 1930s. He joined the British Council in 1940, a congenital heart condition and generally poor health keeping him out of the armed services, and he was to stay with the Council until his death, with postings to Greece, Egypt, Italy, Spain, Turkey and Austria. During his time in Cairo, with Lawrence Durrell and Robin Feden, he founded the magazine *Personal Landscape* as well as writing for the British Council's journal *Citadel*. A first collection, *Aegean Islands and Other Poems*, appeared from Editions Poetry London in 1946.

His collaborative translations of George Seferis's poetry, *The King of Asine and Other Poems*, the first such volume in English, was published by John Lehmann in 1948. *The Twist in the Plotting*, a limited edition of 25 poems printed in the School of Art at the University of Reading and published in 1960, was his second book. Its contents were absorbed into *With Luck Lasting*, which Hodder and Stoughton brought out in 1963, just months before the poet's untimely death.

The strength and originality of Spencer's first volume, *Aegean Islands and Other Poems* was recognized by Ian Fletcher (see pictured with Spencer below), a lecturer and subsequently professor in the English Department at the University of Reading. Fletcher corresponded with Spencer, and was involved in the promotion of his work. The archive held at the University of Reading Special Collections Services contains manuscripts, letters, photographs, and related materials connected with three contributions that Fletcher made to Spencer's presence in the contemporary British poetry of the 1950s, and includes letters that document the publication history of *The Twist in the Plotting*. This archive, the largest single collection of the poet's papers, now begins in the 1940s and extends to letters of condolence and obituary notices in the wake of the poet's still not wholly explained death at the age of 53 (his body was found beside railway lines near Vienna) on 10th September 1963. The archive has recently been enlarged with bequests from the poet's widow, Anne Humphreys, and Roger Bowen, the editor of his 1981 *Collected Poems*, published by Oxford University Press. The archive has now been catalogued by Verity Hunt (see Additional reading section below), with the aid of a grant from the British Academy, and the published checklist will soon be available online on the University of Reading Special Collections website.

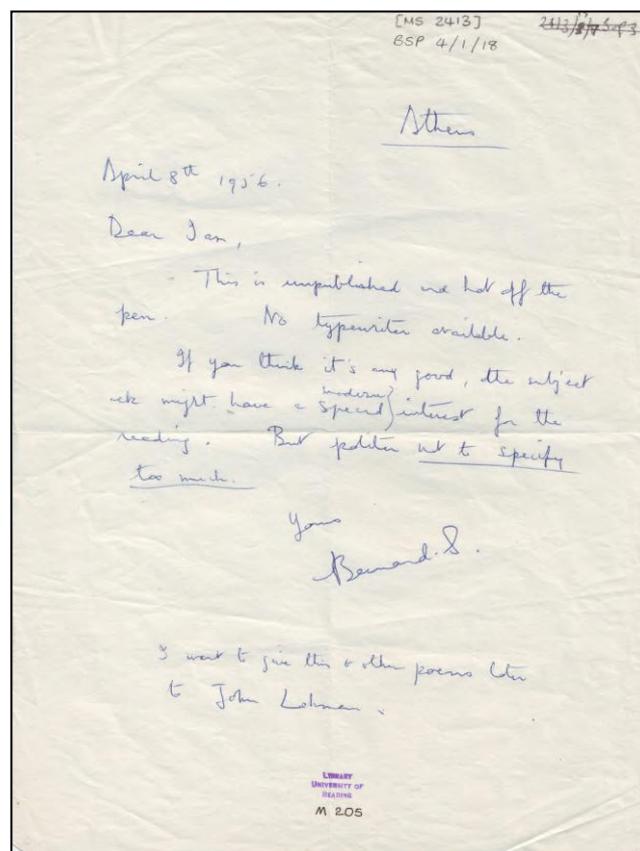


MS 2413/BSP 7/7 Group photograph outside Watney's pub, c. 1950

(pictured right to left: Bernard Spencer, Ruth Spiers, Keith Scott Watson, Ian Fletcher, Nicholas de Watteville).

G. S. Fraser's preface to his anthology *Poetry Now*, published by Faber and Faber in 1956, locates Bernard Spencer among the Cairo group of over a decade before, for whom the 'sense of exile and the stimulation of a strange scene gave, for a time, a certain common tone to poets whose temperaments and gifts were very different, like Mr. Lawrence Durrell, Mr. Bernard Spencer, Mr. Terence Tiller, and the late Keith Douglas.' Going on to describe writers emerging in the mid-fifties, Fraser mentions that 'the limited small editions of new poets published by the Fine Art Department of Reading University, and chosen by Mr. John Wain' had contributed to 'a really new attitude to poetry, rooted in new social conditions'. Ian Fletcher and the Fine Art Department would soon add Spencer to the list of poets whose work was made available through the activities of Reading's English and Fine Art collaborations during this period.

The correspondence between Bernard Spencer and Ian Fletcher continues with two brief notes relating to a poetry reading that took place at the ICA in the spring of 1956. Fletcher may have read Spencer's poems himself, for the poet was writing from the Greek capital to which he had been transferred in September 1955, a place that had suddenly turned violent (see image and transcription below):



MS 2413 BSP 4/1/18 Note from Spencer to Ian Fletcher dated April 8th, 1956 referring to the poem 'The Rendezvous'.

Athens

April 8th 1956

Dear Ian,

This is unpublished and hot off the pen. No typewriter available.

If you think it's any good, the subject etc might have a special interest for the reading.

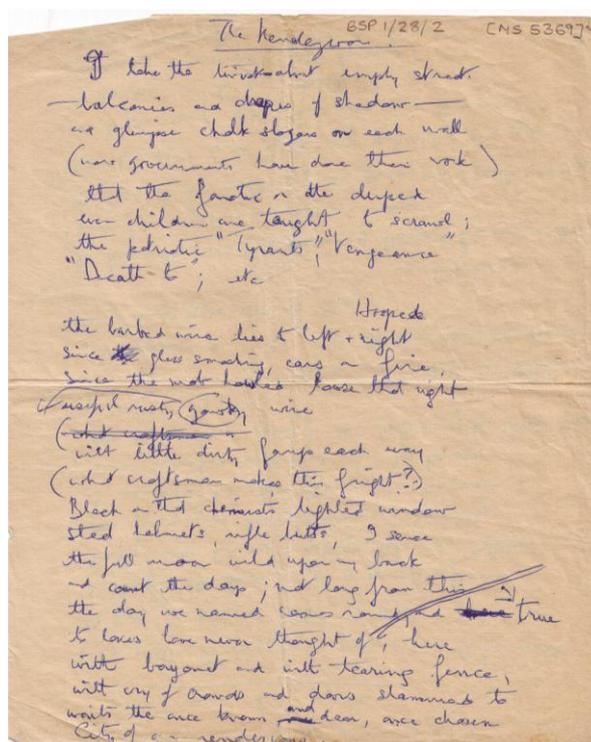
But politic not to specify too much.

Yours

Bernard S.

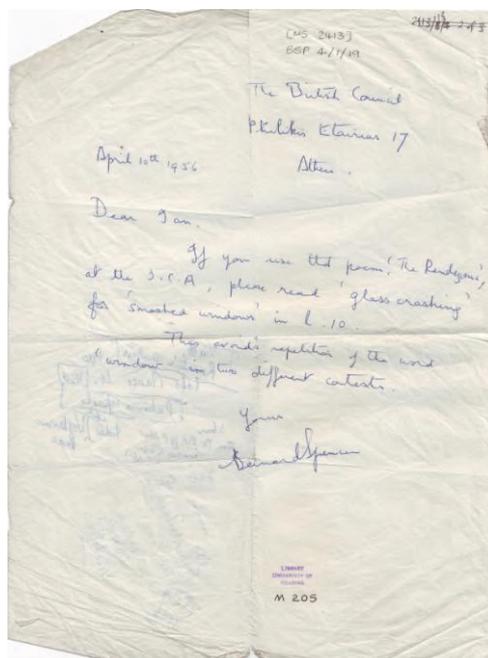
I want to give this and other poems later to John Lehmann.

Lehmann was then editing the *London Magazine*, one of the places in which the memory of Spencer's poetry was, and has been, kept alive. It was his successor in the editorship, Alan Ross, who published the first version of his *Collected Poems* in 1965. The poem 'hot off the pen' on 8 April 1956 was *The Rendezvous* in the manuscript text included with his letter. Evidence in the Reading archive suggests that this poem did come 'hot off the pen', or pencil in fact, appearing more or less fully formed on one tissue sheet containing a pencil draft with deletions, over which alternatives are written, and around which other alternatives and rephrased lines have been jotted. In the Reading drafts, we can follow how Spencer practiced the art of teasing implication and formal shape from the expression of feelings, provoked by contradictions in the detail noticed from an actual lived experience.



MS 5369 BSP 1/28/2: Manuscript draft of 'The Rendezvous'.

Another note sent to Fletcher two days later refers again to *The Rendezvous* (see image and transcription below):



MS 2413 BSP 4/1/19 Note from Bernard Spencer to Ian Fletcher dated April 10th, 1956 referring to the poem *The Rendezvous*.

The British Council
Philikis Etairias 17
Athens
April 10th 1956
Dear Ian,

If you use the poem, 'The Rendezvous', at the I.C.A., please read 'glass crashing' for 'smashed windows' in l. 10.

This avoids repetition of the word 'window' in two different contexts.

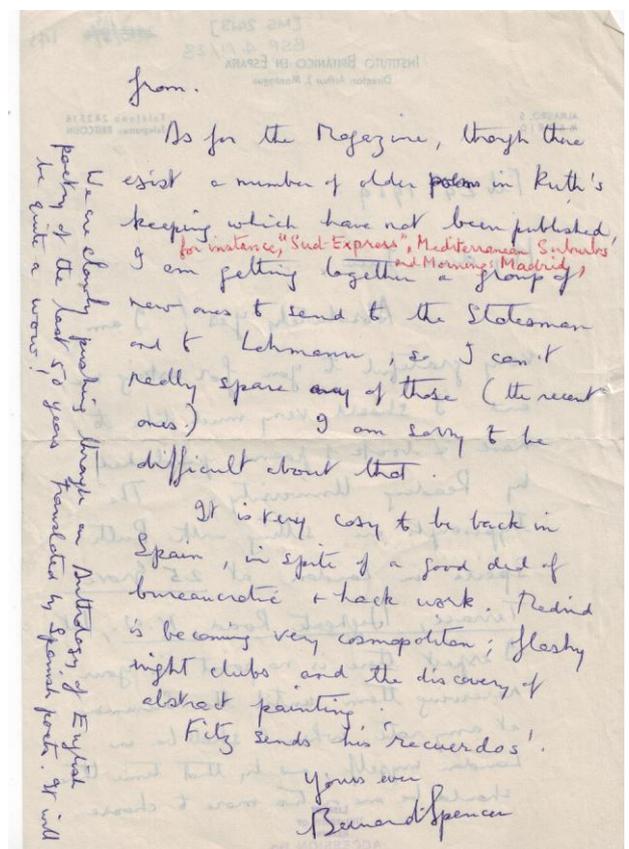
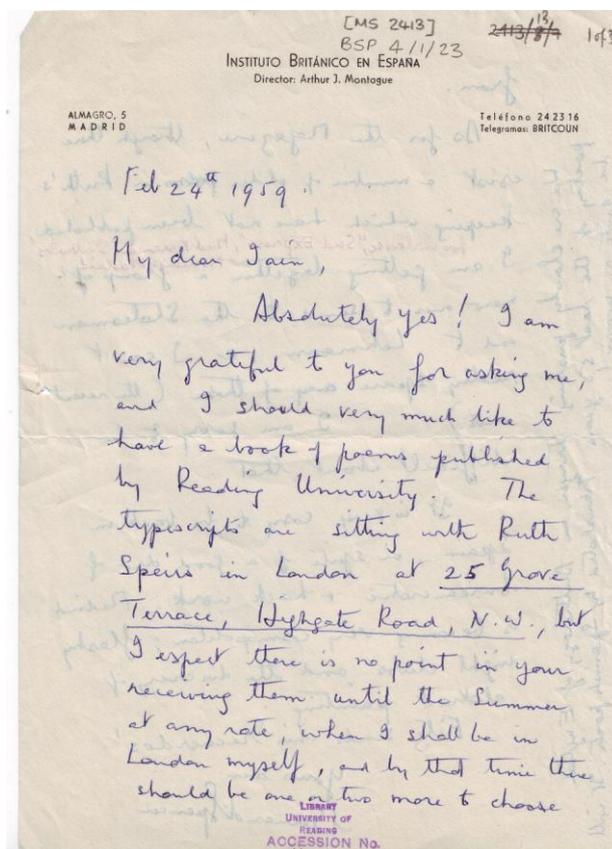
Yours,

Bernard Spencer

As this alternative reading is included in the pencil draft, it would appear that the poet had overlooked it when writing out and sending off a clean text. Introducing this poem for a Third Programme radio broadcast recorded on 30 July 1959, Spencer's comment is politic in not specifying too much: 'in a town which you know and love there is an outbreak of political feeling; mobs march through the streets rioting; soldiers are called in. Civilized values are forgotten in the excited satisfactions of the masses.' The deportation of

Archbishop Makarios on 9 March 1956 from British Cyprus resulted in rioting both on the island and in Athens, where the British European Airways offices had their windows smashed. Sir Anthony Eden, the then prime minister, would have been one of those 'Ministers in tight morning coats' who 'miles from here have done their work' in lines deleted from the draft and replaced by the more neutrally discreet 'since governments have done their work'. This is why Spencer writes that 'the subject etc might have a special interest for the reading' and that it would be politic 'not to specify too much.' The graffiti is anti-British and the phrase 'governments have done their work' refers to the doings of both the British, originally picked out for sole blame, and the Greeks who had both sent troops in to restore calm, and were making representations at the United Nations for sovereignty over the island.

A further break in this correspondence of about two and a half years then follows, though these were the years in which Fletcher recalls having invited Spencer to read in Reading, and a further BBC broadcast was made. The poet's next letter makes it clear he is responding to the suggestion that a selection of his poems be printed in a limited edition at the university's Department of Fine Art. Spencer's reply is on letter-headed paper (see images and transcription below):



MS 2413 BSP 4/1/23 Letter from Bernard Spencer to Ian Fletcher accepting offer of book publication.

Instituto Británico ed España
Director: Arthur J. Montague
Almagro, 5

Madrid

Feb 24th 1959

My dear Iain,

Absolutely yes! I am very grateful to you for asking me, and I should very much like to have a book of poems published by Reading University. The typescripts are sitting with Ruth Speirs in London at 25 Grove Terrace, Highgate Road, N.W., but I expect there is no point in you receiving them until the Summer at any rate, when I shall be in London myself, and by that time there should be one or two more to choose from.

As for the Magazine, though there exist a number of older poems in Ruth's keeping which have not been published, [inserted: for instance, "Sud-Express", Mediterranean Suburbs and Mornings Madrid,] I am getting together a group of new ones to send to the Statesman and to Lehmann, so I can't really spare any of those (the recent ones.) I am sorry to be difficult about that.

It is very cosy to be back in Spain, in spite of a good deal of bureaucratic and hack work. Madrid is becoming very cosmopolitan; fleshy night clubs and the discovery of abstract painting.

Fitz sends his 'recuerdos'.

Yours ever,

Bernard Spencer

The next letter is from almost a year later, when preparations for the publication have clearly moved to a fairly late stage:

The British Institute

Almagro 5

Madrid

Feb 2nd 1960

Dear Ian,

It's good to hear from you, especially now, with our cheering news!

I enclose some recent poems. Some you definitely haven't seen. I don't know whether you have already got copies of 'Feathery Grasses' and 'The Beginning', both of which I believe are as good as anything I have done. 'Chestnuts' seems to come off, too; I got the idea when I was staying in Buckinghamshire last September-October. Maybe you will like one of the others, too.

Title; I suggest ‘The Beginning’. The other title — ‘Notes by a Foreigner’, though it suits the poem, seems to me too bleak, forbidding, for a book.

Dedication;

“To Ruth Speirs and Clover Pertíñez, who criticized and appreciated”.

‘Fitz’ sends you his best wishes. Why don’t you come out here again? £15 (travelling comfortably) each way. With warning from you, I could put you up.

I shall be briefly in London, Feb 15th — 21st, address from Peter Harrison, British Council, 65 Davies St, W. 1.

A woman I know here has just broken her rib, coughing. Who would not spend the winter in Sunny Spain?

Yours

Bernard Spencer

Dumas’ ‘The Three Musketeers’ has just been released from the Papal Index ‘*Librorum Prohibitorum*’!

Spencer’s dedication acknowledges support for his work both at home and in Spain. Ruth Speirs (*see group photograph above*), who also has an archive at the University of Reading Special Collections, had known Spencer since the Cairo years. Clover de Pertíñez was a twenty-year veteran of the British Institute in Madrid. A confidante of the poet during his years there, she continued to correspond with him after his transfer to Vienna in the autumn of 1962. Either Fletcher did not like Spencer’s suggestion of *The Beginning* for the title poem, or the poet had second thoughts, for the title problem comes up again in the next surviving piece of correspondence:

The British Institute

Almagro 5

Madrid

May 19th 1960

My dear Iain,

Scandalous that I haven’t answered you before this! I have been busy with a special rush of lectures and theatre performances — the University put on an English Week, and I also had special commitments at the Institute.

Anyhow, may I give you suggestions for a title and a dedication within a few days? I really mean it. For the title, the idea, I expect, is to pick out a phrase, if not a title, from one of the poems which will be used in the book. You have the only complete typescript, but I am going to dig out of various drawers as many typed poems as I can find, spread them on a table and walk round them and see what I can do. I really won’t stand you up about this.

One of the poems you've got came out in the Statesman on the 14th. Did you happen to see it?

Do you know, I have never been in Ireland? So I was very curious to hear your impressions. Must go. But then I have never even been to Wales!

Has an American poet, John Nims, turned up at Reading to give a talk on American poetry? I told him to greet you if you met.

Something very Spanish: an English ballet company, the Western Ballet, is giving some performances here, and in their publicity one of the ballets is said to be on the subject of "The Eternal Triangle ..." The Spanish have translated this as, "La Divinidad"!

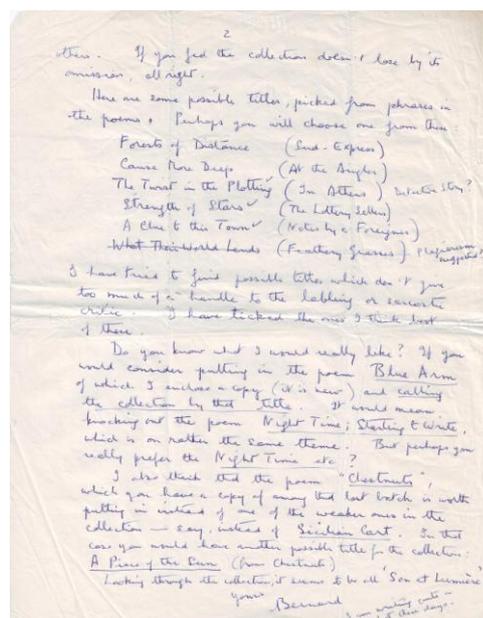
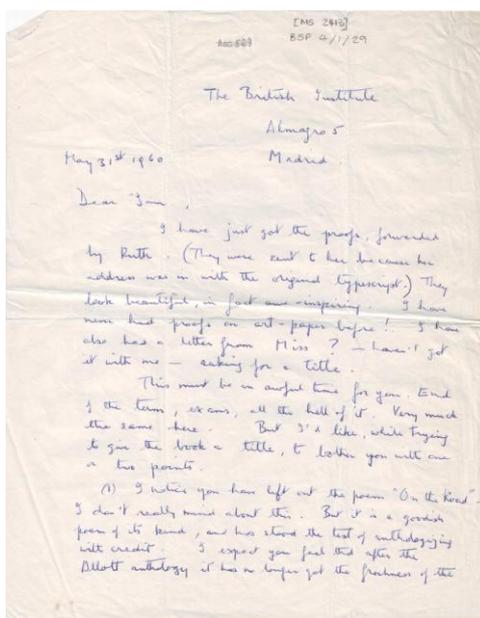
I promise to write extremely soon,

Yours,

Bernard

The poem mentioned was *Feathery Grasses*. John Frederick Nims (1913-1999) was Visiting Professor of Poetry at the University of Madrid from September 1958 to August 1960, during which time he met Spencer somewhere between six and ten times, having supper at each other's apartments, according to a 24 July 1978 letter to Roger Bowen: 'I remember him as tall, dignified, gentle, sensitive — and rather sad, it seemed to me. We once gave a poetry reading together at the University of Madrid, and one of the few remarks of his I remember is that he said, in connection with his preference for clear poetry, "I don't like puzzle poems."'

The idea of picking a phrase from one of Spencer's poems is taken up again when the book has already reached proof stage (*see images and transcription below*):



MS 2413 BSP 4/1/29 Letter from Bernard Spencer to Ian Fletcher suggesting titles for the book.

The British Institute

Almagro 5

Madrid

May 31st 1960

Dear Ian,

I have just got the proofs, forwarded by Ruth. (They were sent to her because her address was in the original typescript.) They look beautiful, in fact awe-inspiring. I have never had a proof on art-paper before! I had also had a letter from Miss ? — haven't got it with me — asking for a title.

This must be an awful time for you. End of the term, exams, all the hell of it. Very much the same here. But I'd like, while trying to give the book a title, to bother you with one or two points.

(1) I notice you have left out the poem "*On the Road*". I don't really mind about this. But it is a goodish poem of its kind, and has stood the test of anthologizing with credit. I expect you feel that after the Allott anthology it has no longer got the freshness of the others. If you feel the collection doesn't lose by its omission, all right.

Here are some possible titles, picked from phrases in the poems. Perhaps you will choose one from these:

Forests of Distance (Sud-Express)

Cause More Deep (At the Angler)

The Twist in the Plotting [ticked] (In Athens) Detective Story?

Strength of Stars [ticked] (The Lottery Sellers)

A Clue to this Town [ticked] (Notes by a Foreigner)

What Their World Lends (Feathery Grasses) [deleted] Plagiarism suggested?

I have tried to find possible titles which don't give too much of a handle to the labeling or sarcastic critic. I have ticked the ones I think best of these.

Do you know what I would really like? If you would consider putting in the poem Blue Arm of which I enclose a copy (it is new) and calling the collection by that title. It would mean knocking out the poem Night Time; Starting to Write, which is on rather the same theme. But perhaps you really would prefer the Night Time etc?

I also think that the poem "Chestnuts", which you have a copy of among that last batch is worth putting in instead of one of the weaker ones in the collection — say, instead of Sicilian Cart. In that case you would have another possible title for the collection: A Piece of the Sun (from Chestnuts.)

Looking through the collection, it seems to be all 'Son et Lumière'!

Yours

Bernard

I am writing quite a lot these days.

After Spencer has proposed his five or six possible titles, he then makes offers and suggestions that would have enlarged the Reading book at proof stage. This was something that could not be done. In a carbon copy of a reply dated 21 June 1960, Fletcher heads him off and settles slightly inaccurately (with 'Twists' for 'The Twist') on the first of the titles that Spencer had both suggested and ticked:

Dear Bernard,

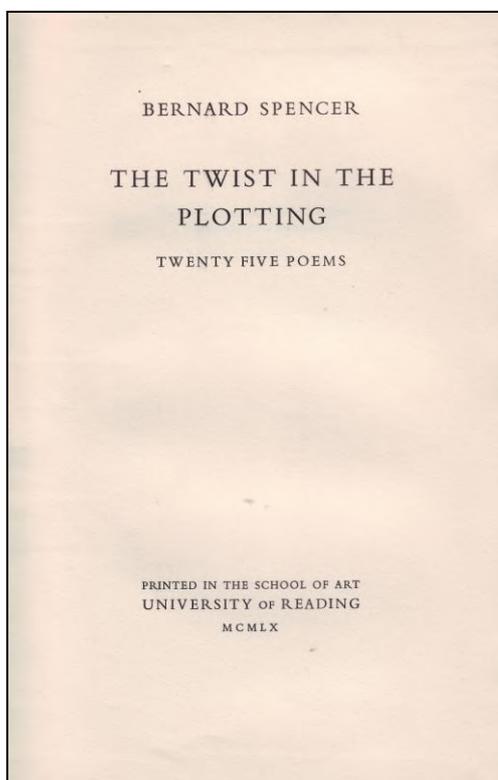
Thank you for your letter. I am sorry not to have answered this before but I have not been able to get hold of a copy of your proofs as the printer has only committed himself to one. I gather that you have sent him two or three more poems but I fear that none of the extra poems you wanted to put in can be included as the volume has now been made up. I imagine that as soon as the book is published you will receive an offer from a publisher and be able to include them in a larger book. I think that your proposed title "Twists in the Plotting" will do very well. I am looking forward very much to seeing the book when it comes out.

Apart from the usual places, have you any strong views about where you would like it to be noticed?

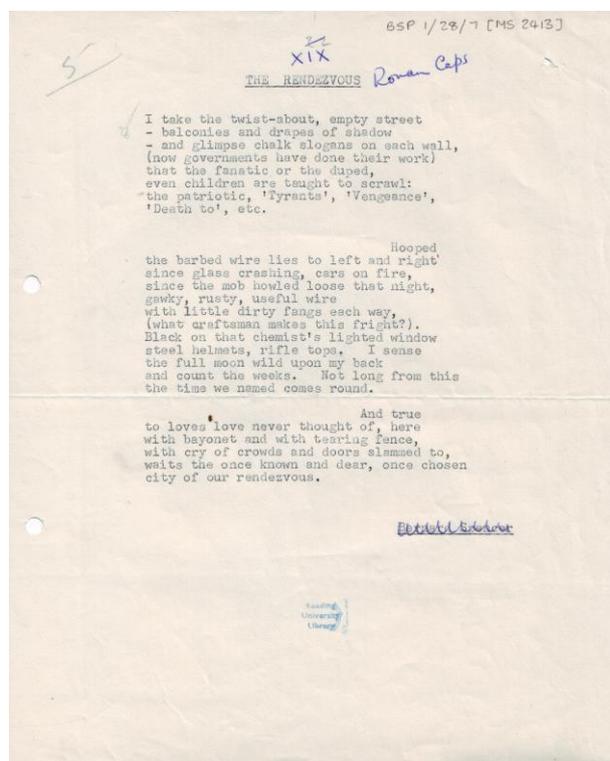
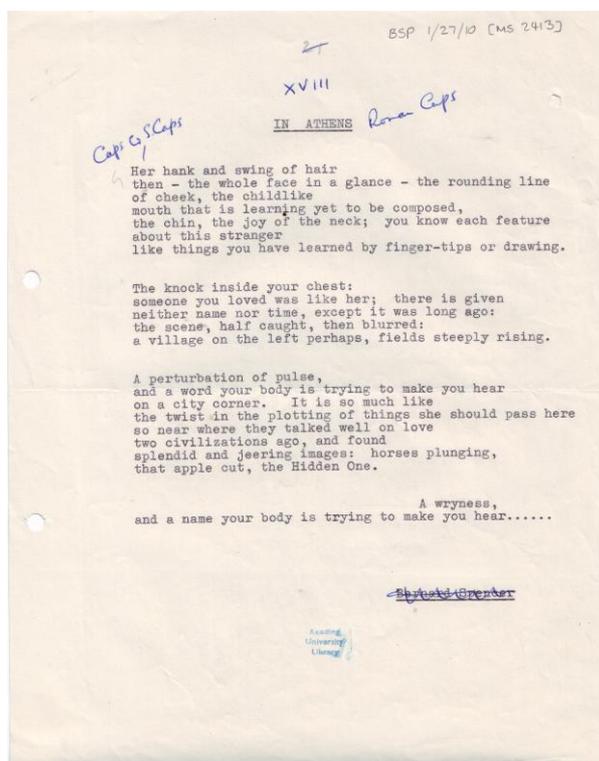
Yours ever,

Fletcher's expectation that his friend would be able to publish an enlarged edition was proved correct when *With Luck Lasting* appeared a little over two years after *The Twist in the Plotting*.

The printing (*see title-page shown below*) was completed on the last day of the year, and the publication date of 1960 is, in this sense, a fiction: copies being sent out to subscribers, reviews editors, and to the poet himself in 1961. The dedication page reads: 'To Ruth Speirs and Clover Pertinez, / *who criticized and appreciated*'. The colophon reports that '*There are 150 copies this being number* [hand written: 64].



This choice, *The Twist in the Plotting*, is an inspired title for a book of poems by Bernard Spencer. The poet's letter notes that the title is a phrase from *In Athens*, a companion piece to *The Rendezvous*, which appears immediately before it in the Reading limited edition, and then in all subsequent volumes of his poems:



MS 2413 BSP 1/27/10 (left) and 1/28/7(right) Marked-up typescripts used by typesetter for *In Athens* and *The Rendezvous*.

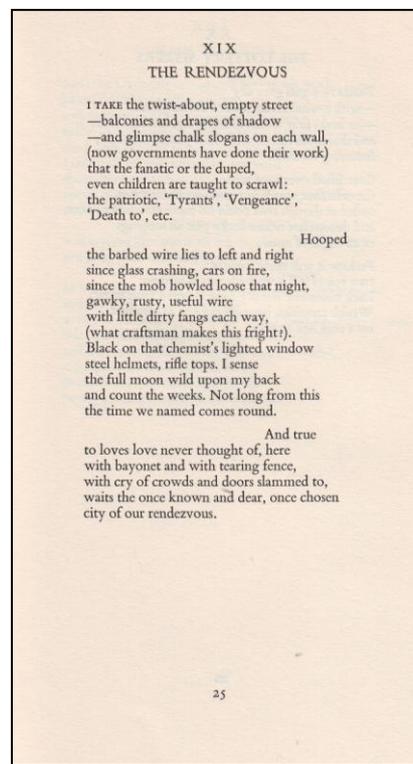
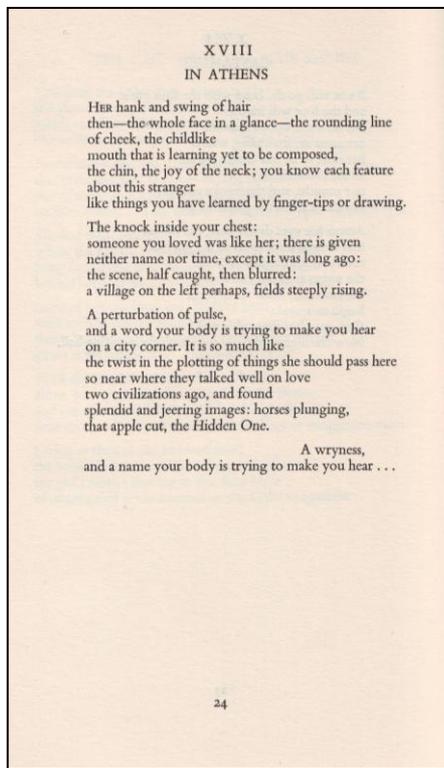
In Athens

Her hank and swing of hair
then — the whole face in a glance — the rounding line
of cheek, the childlike
mouth that is learning yet to be composed,
the chin, the joy of the neck; you know each feature
about this stranger
like things you have learned by finger-tips or drawing.

The knock inside your chest:
someone you loved was like her; there is given
neither name nor time, except it was long ago:
the scene, half caught, then blurred:
a village on the left perhaps, fields steeply rising.

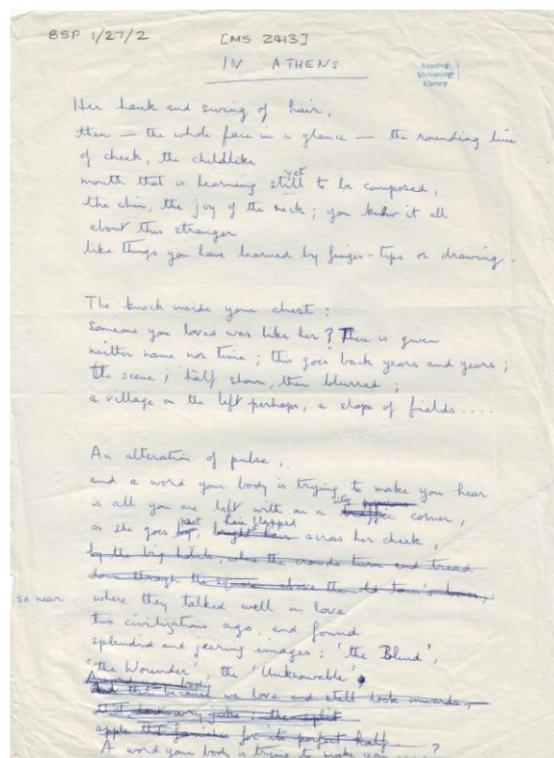
A perturbation of pulse,
and a word your body is trying to make you hear
on a city corner. It is so much like
the twist in the plotting of things she should pass here
so near where they talked well on love
two civilizations ago, and found
splendid and jeering images: horses plunging,
that apple cut, the Hidden One.

A wryness,
And a name your body is trying to make you hear ...



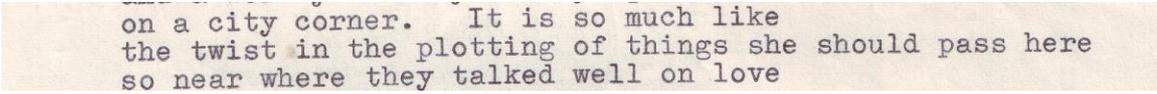
Pages 24 and 25 showing the poems *In Athens* and *The Rendezvous* from the published edition of *The Twist in the Plotting*.

Manuscripts in the Reading archive again reveal the poem's course of gestation and evolution. There is a pencil palimpsest for *In Athens* like that for *The Rendezvous*, but so over-written as to be almost impossible to transcribe. It is followed by a second draft, written in blue biro (see image below).



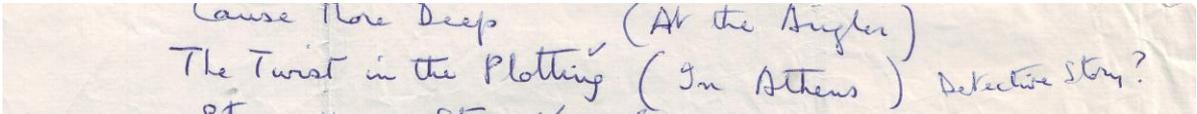
MS 2413 1/27/2 An almost complete manuscript draft in biro of *In Athens* with revisions.

A first typed version has the opening two verses almost as in the printed text. Completion of the poem would require a further biro draft headed '(New version)' in which the final two lines of verse three are revised to the published reading, as they appear in the typescript that formed the printer's copy for *The Twist in the Plotting* (see extract below).



on a city corner. It is so much like
the twist in the plotting of things she should pass here
so near where they talked well on love

Above: Extract from marked-up typescript (MS 2413 BSP 1/27/10) used by typesetter for the poem, In Athens, showing 'the twist in the plotting' line chosen for the title.



Cause More Deep (At the Singler)
The Twist in the Plotting (In Athens) Detective story?
of

When Spencer picked out his phrase 'the twist in the plotting' as a possible title, he added the comment: 'Detective Story?' (see extract shown above). Fletcher then selected the title, as encouraged to by the poet, and certainly he stuck with the best one on offer, heading Spencer off from a number of far less satisfactory titles. However, when reporting to the poet which one he was happy to go with, Fletcher cites that pluralized and indefinite variation: 'Twists in the Plotting'. Yet what is so striking about Spencer's line, and thus his title, is the repetition of the definite article: 'The Twist in the Plotting' and the singularity of the nouns. The detective-story-like approach to discovering significance is reinforced by the implication of a singular and definite 'something' that is wrong or twisted to be revealed. Yet the poet does not pretend that this is a discovery we could easily make. His poem must end with the image of a body straining to hear a name, a process the poem itself imitates in its improvised auditory shaping. A poet's oeuvre is as good as the individual performances that survive when the period agendas that promoted or obscured them have evaporated. Among Bernard Spencer's works there are quite enough such excellent performances for his poetry always to be valued by those with an ear for the plotted twists of its echoic virtues.

Peter Robinson is currently editing a new edition of Bernard Spencer's Complete poems, translations, and selected prose.

Additional reading

- *Bernard Spencer at Reading : catalogue of the Bernard Spencer collection at the University of Reading*. Catalogue by Verity Hunt. Introduction by Peter Robinson. Reading : University of Reading, 2009.