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Tom Raworth: Collected Poems

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Tom Raworth

COLLECTED POEMS

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For more than thirty years, Tom Raworth has been literally the Odd Man Out of contemporary British poetry. He is, for example, the "1" in Emmanuel Hocquard and Claude Royet-Journoud's important French anthology *21 + 1* (Delta 1986)—an anthology that includes twenty-one contemporary American poets and a single British one who seems to fit the more radical American model. The common wisdom is that, as an heir to the aesthetic of Black Mountain, Raworth, whose closest poet-friend was the late Ed Dorn, "belongs" to the U.S., where he has, over the years, held many residencies and lectureships. On his home turf (Raworth lives in Cambridge), the response has been much cooler, although the rare critical essays on his work have been by English academics like John Barrell and Colin McCabe.

Carcanet's new *Collected Poems* is thus a milestone, a gathering, almost 600 pages in length, of the poet's distinctive lyric from the early 1960s to the present, from epigrams and sonnets to love songs and travel poems, to burlesque and found text, to the long columnar poems like

Ace and Writing, to the late verbal-visual texts of *Catacoustics*. Indeed, since Raworth's earlier chapbooks, many of them illustrated and designed by the author himself, are now collector's items, more often than not out of print, the Carcanet volume should be an eye-opener, persuading British readers that they have a lion in their living room, even if an oddly gentle and unassuming one. And further: despite all efforts to turn Raworth into an honorary American, the *Collected Poems* reveals the poet to be surprisingly English in his vocabulary, syntax, and turn of phrase. He is, for example, much more allusive, more "literary," than the U.S. language poets.

In a rare comment on a fellow British poet, Raworth once remarked wryly, with reference to Philip Larkin's famous "This Be the Verse," "I imagine he wrote 'They tuck you up, your mum and dad' and then rode the wave of a typo." Larkin obviously did no such thing, but Raworth's own early poems, contemporary with "They fuck you up," show precisely what such playful attentiveness can do. Here is an early poem called "These Are Not Catastrophes I Went out of my Way to Look For":

corners of my mouth sore
i keep licking them, drying them with the back of my hand
bitten nails but three i am growing
skin frayed round the others white flecks on them all

no post today, newspapers and the childrens'
comic, i sit
in the lavatory reading heros the spartan
and the iron man

flick ash in the bath trying to hit the plughole
listen to the broom outside examine
new pencil marks on the wall, a figure four

the shadows, medicines, a wicker
laundry basket lid pink with toothpaste

between my legs i read

levi stra
origina
quality clo

leaning too far forward
into the patch of sunlight (CP 37)

Larkin has a poem called "Home is so sad," that mourns the family house, bereft of its dead owners, with the words, "You can see how it was: / Look at the pictures and the cutlery. / The music in the piano stool. That vase." What pictures, what sheet music, what vase? Raworth's own little domestic poem refuses Larkin's patronizing contract with the reader ("We know how dreary Mum and Dad's décor was, don't we?"), giving us a devastatingly graphic Portrait of the Artist caught up in the domestic round, a kind of latter-day-Leopold Bloom reading *Photo-Bits* as he sits on the toilet.

Raworth's lyrics often have deliciously bombastic titles like "My Face is My Own, I Thought," "You've Ruined my Evening / You've Ruined My Life," or "Come Back, Come Back, O Glittering and White!" The word *catastrophe* comes to us from Greek: *kata* (down) plus *strophe* (turn)—a *strophe* that also designated the first section of a Greek choral ode and, later, simply a structural unit in a given poem. If *catastrophe* originally referred to the dénouement of tragedy and hence a "sudden disaster," it has more recently come to mean "an absolute failure, often in humiliating or embarrassing circumstances" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). And in this sense, Raworth does have his daily domestic catastrophes. His one real decision, the poem suggests, is to have let three of his nails grow—one does need nails for various physical acts—even as there is "skin frayed round the

others white flecks on them all." "Lick" and "fleck" prepare the ground for the "flick" of "flick ash in the bath trying to hit the plughole." Accedia is a state of licking the corners of one's mouth and listening to the broom outside the lavatory door (evidently his wife is trying to tidy up), while examining "new pencil marks on the wall, a figure four." Our man on the toilet does not consider erasing these child graffiti; he just looks at them. And in this context, the "wicker /laundry basket lid pink with toothpaste" alludes slyly to Robert Creeley's "A Wicker Basket," that now classic ballad of drunken regression and solipsism. But whereas Creeley's speaker hides from the world inside his "wicker basket," Raworth's, scanning comic books with titles like *Heros the Spartan* and *The Iron Man*, may be said to keep in touch with the catastrophe of Greek tragedy.

The poet's reading "between my legs" is especially apposite in this regard:

levi stra
origina
quality clo

Literally, one surmises, the poet is contemplating, not his navel, but the label affixed to his jeans: "Levi-stra[uss] / origina[l]/ quality clo[thes]." But "clo" can also refer to closet (as in water-closet) or to the "closure" Levi Strauss was always looking for in his structuralist systems—and which Raworth himself rejects. "Origina[l]" is thus ambiguous, pointing to the poet's own *writing* as well as his reading, for example his lining up the margins here so as to produce the column *a-a-o* which gives us Raworth's own alpha and omega. But let's not get carried away: if the poet is "leaning too far forward" into that "patch of sunlight," he is likely to miss his goal—and that would be literally going out of one's way to produce a "catastrophe" one certainly hadn't been looking for.

I give this somewhat labored reading of Raworth's poem so as to counter the common claim that his is a lyric that "doesn't say anything" that

makes no sense. Every word and morpheme, I would suggest, is carefully chosen, beginning with those “corners of my mouth” that relate to the corners of the lavatory and of the newspaper page as well. And further: the first syllable of “corners” rhymes with “sore” (with a paragram on “core”) at the end of line 1. It is not meaning Raworth does away with—on the contrary—but the causal relationships usually expected of poetry. Why is the speaker letting three of his fingernails grow rather than two or four? Who knows? And why doesn’t he have anything better to do than to flick ash into the tub’s plughole? Again, we cannot point at a “cause”; the condition simply *is* and the poem’s aim is to define it as accurately as possible.

The later poems develop this mode with increasing complexity and resonance; many take their cue from the long columnar poem (between 1 and 4 words per column) of more than 2,000 lines called *Ace*. The original version (1974), illustrated with witty line drawings by Barry Hall for Goliard, was not reprinted in complete form until 2001 by Edge Books. It is available in the *Collected Poems* in its entirety (pp. 201-29), but in a format of two columns per page and no illustrations. The double column recalls John Ashbery’s “Litany” and suggests that one may read across as well as down, but I don’t think this is what Raworth had in mind, for continuity is as important here as is macrostructure.

The four sections of *Ace* are suggestively titled “in think,” “in mind,” “in motion,” and “in place,” and the coda, “Bolivia: Another End of *Ace*,” has shorter sections called “in transit,” “in part,” “in consideration,” and “in love.” The challenge is to see how these parts relate: is “in think” the same as “in mind”? And how does “in love” relate to being “in transit”? Raworth’s focus throughout is on what Marcel Duchamp called the “infrathin”—the most minute difference between a and b, as when, Duchamp says, “tables” is not the same as “table,” “ate” not the same as “eat.”

When Raworth performs *Ace* orally, he recites it at top speed, no change of inflection, and no pause for breath—a bravura performance that has been imitated by a score of younger poets. The even tone has often been interpreted as the absence of affect: everything seems to be as important as everything else. But when one reads *Ace* a few times, it reveals itself as curiously emotional in that its forward thrust, its drive toward change, is everywhere short-circuited by refrain (e.g., “SHOCK SHOCK”), repetition, rhyme, echolalia, and double entendre so that the asserted continuity is increasingly hard to maintain. Accordingly, the poem’s meditation on identity, time, and memory, varied in a myriad ways, becomes a complex process in which the *Ace* never trumps for long. Raworth’s pronouns shift from “I” to “you” to “he,” the referents never being specified; and the language oscillates between straightforward abstract phrase to found text, citation, allusion to film plots and pop recordings, and every manner of cliché. *Ace* opens with a rhyme for the title--“new face”-- and continues “from my home / what do you think / I’ll voice out/ of the news.” A record is played “with a light pickup” and we read:

 bless you brother
 yours
 till the energy
 gaps again
 let light
 blink
 history think
 leaves some thing
 like a bomb
 relief again
 to sail
 against depression
 i glow
 and flicker
 change

but first
a present
that
fits me
to a t
no mist
but sky
and we
beneath it

The predominant vowel of this passage is the short *i*, following or preceding the consonant *t* as in *till* or *fits*. This minimal pattern is heard again and again, its structural control in tension with the poem's dominant rhetorical device, which is the non-sequitur. Nothing here "follows," and yet almost every phrase echoes a more familiar one, as when "Let there be light" becomes "let light / blink" or when the "I" is seen to "glow/ and flicker" like the proverbial burn-out candle. A "present" is given "that / fits me / to a t / no mist", " the letters almost spelling out the word "gift". And this is followed by the mock-astute observation about "sky / and we / beneath it."

In the *I-T-T* context of the column, the two words that stand out by contrast are "bomb" and "depression." What's a bomb doing in this "history think" (perhaps an echo of Eliot's "Gerontion," where history forces the poet to "Think now"), context? And why and how does one "sail / against depression"? The refrain "SHOCK / SHOCK" now comes as a reminder of the world lived in with its constant talk of bombs, but the blinking light turns into a "thinking light" and then a "painted light." While the word "energy" recurs a number of times to suggest that, even after the bomb, we just have to keep going. The short, fragmented units equivocate continually between all that is fixed and frozen and the motion that breaks through the ice. Despite the presence of "the home service/ the light programme / the third programme" and other deadly daily routines, "words / clutter me / me / face

enters / not me" / use no/ mad/ for feeling / me / and / it/ is a song/ cloud/
white/night/moon." *Ace* tracks a Beckettian process of "I can't go on, I'll go
on," using everyday lingo and a steady *stream* of allusions. It regularly
breaks into song and concludes (in the second, or Bolivia conclusion) with
the words "by delight/ in softness/heart/and heart/ so far/ a/ part," where
the pauses at line break provide a kind of Frank Sinatra cum Wittgenstein
conclusion.

If such writing looks casual, read again! For one thing, no two
sequential lines of *Ace* have exactly the same syntax. Unlike Gertrude Stein,
Raworth is not partial to prepositions at the expense of adjectives or
adverbs; it's just that each line unit is separate from the one before and
after because it has a different syntactic shape. As Raworth puts it after the
first four-hundred lines or so, "why / not / a little / difference / each / time /
certain/ gambles—where in eight lines there is no repetition of grammatical
form. *Difference*, for this brilliant poet, is the source of poetic
inspiration—"think / leaves some thing"-- even as his structural markers
(mostly sonic but also metonymic) are always in place. Indeed, when "in
mind" and "in motion" come together, "in place" can follow. But being so
regularly "in transit," we don't always recognize when we have arrived. A
poem called "Pratheoryctice" says it nicely:

sometimes i wonder
what is introspection
red white and blue
or through mud and blood
to the green fields beyond
which were the colors on a tie (247)

Introspection, it seems, yields strange shards of memory: here the military
images of the US "red white and blue," juxtaposed to "through mud and
blood / to the green fields beyond," the latter, the unofficial motto of the
English Royal Tank Regiment (RTR), fighting its way through two World Wars

across Europe and Africa. The “colors on a tie” –brown for mud, red for blood, and green for the green fields—is a specific reference to the striped regimental tie of the RTR. The lilting rhythms of the regimental song are thus grounded in a specific practice—the regiment’s wearing of the colours. And now the poem’s title makes sense: *Pratheoryctice*: theory, the poet’s “introspection’ reveals, is first and foremost grounded in poetic practice.

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