POETRY, LANGUAGE, THOUGHT: THE VERSE OF STEPHEN RATCLIFFE

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Nowhere is the traditional dichotomy between poetry and philosophy more emphatically challenged than within the context of contemporary American poetics, particularly in relation to the work of "Language" poets. This discussion will focus in detail upon a select but representative passage from one of the most lyric, enigmatic, and difficult—Stephen Ratcliffe—to demonstrate a reading strategy better-suited to that boundary between disciplines. The purpose of this discussion is to encounter Ratcliffe's work in a way appropriate to the project of his postmodern poetics: to reveal in "open" poetic construction a manifestation of Being traditionally not attributed to the intentions of poetry. Because of his involvement with and interrogation of the character of language, Ratcliffe distinguishes himself as simultaneously a poet *and* a thinker—a decidedly postmodern identity.

To overcome the "ancient quarrel" between the two disciplines, instigated by Plato (*The Republic* Book X 302) and surviving intact for centuries, and to expand the domain of poetry beyond strictly that of the emotions, Martin Heidegger defined poetizing as a kind of truth-telling. Heidegger counters Plato's quarrel by affirming that poetry and philosophy share a common ground as responses to Being—that which makes possible the totality of meaning that is a world. The distinction Heidegger draws, perhaps in a Romantic vein, is that poetry says something "new," while thinking returns to what has been said and uncovers in it what has been left *unsaid* (Kockelmans, *On the Truth of Being* 203).

Heidegger's deliberation about poetry and philosophy reveals the ways both bring to light the character of language: "The dialogue of thinking with poetry aims to call forth the *nature* of language, so that mortals may learn again to live within language" (Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 161). In a similar vein, projective poet Robert Creeley asserts that Language poets ask readers to recognize that ". . . Language itself is

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real, and we must learn to live in its complex places" (*Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* 348). Language poets acknowledge that their engagement with truth and language draws them into close proximity with philosophy because, as poet and theorist Charles Bernstein notes, "For both poetry and philosophy, the order of the elements of a discourse is value constituting and indeed experience engendering, and therefore always at issue, never assumable" (as qtd. by Creeley 346).

For Hans-Georg Gadamer also language most firmly grounds the connections between poetry and philosophy. Both poetry and thinking are happenings of the truth made present in human articulation. Both simultaneously reveal and conceal: "Self-bestowal and self-withdrawal—such a dialectic of uncovering and withdrawal seems to hold sway in the mystery of language, both for poets and for philosophers . . . ." (Gadamer, "Philosophy and Poetry" 139). Serving at the disposal of "the mystery of language," both poetry and philosophy give readers over to an experience with that mystery. The language of poetry in particular "does not intend something, but rather is the existence of what it intends . . . ." It becomes an experience that the world affords; it is not merely *about* the world. Most important, the language of both poetry and philosophy delivers thinking of a world into "nearness": both aim to bring thinkers closer to what is (Gadamer, "On the contribution of poetry to the search for truth" 113, 114). Taking its premises from Gadamer's reflections concerning the common ground binding these two domains, this paper will show that while Language poets like Ratcliffe share Heidegger's deep concern for a dialogue between poetry and thinking, their keen awareness of intertextuality collapses even Heidegger's dichotomy. Language poets' understanding of what the tradition of poetic form and content has extended to them and their desire to retrieve from that tradition what has been left "unsaid" in the thinker's sense constitute their "newness." Ratcliffe's poems are radical retrievals, but his poetizing shakes loose the syntax and punctuation of traditional discourse in favor of an associative splicing of imagery and the non-hierarchical melding of abstract notions with concrete detail. Nowhere is the boundary between poetry and thinking more palpable than in his collection of verse entitled *spaces in the light said to be where one / comes from*, a book of 88 parts, each 22 lines long punctuated as a single sentence. Ratcliffe posits a propositional structure in his verse only to explode it to openness beyond assertion, rendering the "new" and inviting the "unsaid" in provocative juxtapositions. This essay will offer a close reading of part 18 to determine the *logos* of one variety of post-

modern American poetics—that historical, temporal totality of meaning that manifests itself in language—to be a rapprochement between poetry and thinking. It will argue that:

a.) Ratcliffe's poetry investigates the character of truth as revealment in response to readers' *a priori* openness;

b.) by defamiliarizing the proposition, Ratcliffe's poetic form interrogates the character of language and a human being's relation to language;

c.) and, his verse simultaneously poetizes and thinks in a Heideggerian sense; and, in so doing, "does not intend something, but rather is the existence of what it intends," to reiterate Gadamer's description. In this way, Ratcliffe instigates the erasure of boundaries between poetry and philosophy.

Here is section 18 in its entirety (note that line numbers have been added for easier reference):

1 Name and address out of sight

2 turned up on mouths nobody watched, slowly the oxygen opened like thought

3 in the neon fatigue of questions following you through the street

4 old words—clear the wires

5 of what you know from whom, to which under the feeling of light-bound

6 orange everyone in bodies a house stares back at, hanging out

7 up the street "what's happening"—to speak of this

8 like iron in your throat eating harbors, someone a completely

9 important guest becoming a corner she knows

10 how you move—already

11 the objects (random indeed) feeling among others a music like the noise

12 thought preserved among others who drive at times to a form

13 more of spaces in the light said to be where one

14 comes from, without means of changing the person in the door

15 whose keys, invisible in the new grass, quiet

16 as if one is the first you lost but fifth when the temperature drops

17 to become noise—notice the falls of color beyond reach

18 of one surface solid as the next, the remnants

19 say "of poetry" for whose sake a hearing that sounds

20 as if your voice, about to advance

21 in the white that seems to echo pleasure

22 should open the gates she notes by morning, light-blown, melts away. (18)

In the first part of section 18, the emplacement of the human mode of being seems, at best, shadowy: "Name and address out of sight." Obviously, with name and address unavailable, people are lost; they know neither who they are nor where they live. But these commonplaces carry richer poetic and ontological dimensions. That which makes bestowal of meaning possible—a naming function—is not accessible. The "address"—that being of the world that stands forth as a totality of meaning and, as it were, speaks to human beings, prompts their articulation—is similarly hidden. This poem opens with a situation of concealment that challenges readers' stance toward or relationship to what presents itself as world. What stands out in the succeeding lines of section 18 is that, through ambiguity in both diction and line-splicing, and the indeterminacy of referents, Ratcliffe invites readers as thinkers to listen to Being's "address" and "name" things in their response to this world; readers must retrieve what is concealed from that place "out of sight."

From the start, the poem accentuates the oblivious character of the world, what Heidegger would call its "fallen" state (*Being and Time* 264): "name" and "address" "turned up on mouths nobody watched." Whether "turned up" indicates "found" or whether "turned up on mouths" suggests a noticeable smile, the result is the same: "nobody watched." As this inattention continues, oxygen, which is essential to being, opens "like thought" in line 2. Here Ratcliffe provides the foundations of the human mode of being on their most fundamental levels:

"thought" is the nearness to being that defines what it is to be human; oxygen, a building block of life, reveals itself "like thought"—it, too, is primal and essential to being. Being, in all its vitality, opens in its simplest ontic and ontological aspects.

But, the promise of a "clean slate" is grounded in an amorphous *polis* that seems exhausted: "in the neon fatigue of questions following you through the street." The "you" directly addressed by the poem is worn out by the relentless "neon fatigue of questions" dogging her/him through the street, questions persistent in their unanswered form. And, further defining the oppressive milieu, in the first of a series of key oppositions in the poem, the unseen volatility of oxygen in the previous line is juxtaposed against inert neon. The exhausting questions may be reiterated in the appositive, "old words," in line four, *or* "old words" may present a fragmented subject that prompts the call to action in lines four and five: "old words—clear the wires / of what you know from whom." Ratcliffe is both *reiterative* in his use of apposition—his re-naming what has already been said—and *declarative* in positing and responding to "old words" by demanding a clearing. In Heidegger's terms, Ratcliffe's use of apposition allows him to say something "again"—to suggest another reading—with the possibility of revealing in alternatives something "new" left "unsaid." This is the first of several invitations to recursive interpretation in the poem: like all thinking, Ratcliffe's proposition loops backward and moves forward.

Ratcliffe's imperative to "clear the wires" implores the "you" of this poetic address to examine sources—to retrieve origins—in much the same way Charles Olson advised thinkers to "hunt among stones" in his poem, "The Kingfishers"—to look for oneself at the evidence of what presents itself to gain a more immediate perspective on historical knowledge (*The Collected Poems of Charles Olson* 93). In this juxtaposition, Ratcliffe instigates the reader's own questioning: what is important about the disparity between *what* one knows and *from whom* one gained knowledge? Is the poet "clearing the wires" to make distinct the "whatness" of seeming concrete fact in relation to the historical character of all knowledge—*who* speaks it and *when*? The remainder of section 18 poses similarly essential questions: what is revealed here? By whom? And, most importantly, why?

With the veiled situation of being established in the first five-line section, the poem moves on in the next five lines to speak from this condition within its constraints. The words "to which" in line 5 signal a change in the direction of the discourse thus far. The referent for "to

which" is unclear. It may point back to "clear the wires," meaning *in relation to which*; the phrase may refer to the "what" or the "for whom," both in line 5. In any case, the phrase points "to" something away from the obliviousness of the earlier section. If its precise grammatical position is undefined, perhaps Ratcliffe implies that the direction for the necessary "clearing" is not determined but merely found: thinkers' relationship to the situation of being evolves from possibilities.

To concretize his own "allegory of the cave," as it were, Ratcliffe evokes imagistically a place that is both mundane and unfamiliar. All things come to presence "under the feeling of light-bound / orange"—anesthetizing the senses with the orange-red glow of inert neon gas. In this light, humans and things seem indistinct and interchangeable: "everyone in bodies a house stares back at." People inhabit their flesh as if it were merely a receptacle, and, in an anthropomorphic turnabout, "a house" stares back at them, human bodies as fellow structures. Both sentient and insentient entities seem to share the same acuity of insight or lack thereof. Or perhaps, in a more philosophic turn, Ratcliffe again returns to Olson, who claimed that to be a poet, the thinker must achieve an *humilitas* (*Selected Writings of Charles Olson* 25): standing out in relation to things, the poet must acknowledge her/his human position as a being among other beings, without privileged rank. In lines 6 and 7, the next phrase "hanging out / up the street 'what's happening'" again carries with it two possible referents: what's happening in the bodies or what's happening in the house, thereby reinforcing the equal footing of entities and human beings in this cityscape. "What's happening" is merely street-talk, as it appears in quotation marks; it poses the common inquiry, "What's going on?"—returning the reader's attention to essential concerns. The bodies, the houses, the questions all unfold, all happen, in this place and time. This is the event of the poem.

"To speak of this"—reiterating the drive to "clear the wires" and make distinct what is happening and to whom—is not easy: "to speak of this / like iron in your throat eating harbors." Implacable iron constricts articulation. The throat as the site of saying, singing, and "clearing," for that matter, is torn from its human context. The throat metamorphoses into a channel for external harbors. Speaking is out of the question; the throat chokes on the world, and a response is impossible. The weighty iron digests forms but does not allow them to be created. In an alternative reading, the line could implicitly suggest "like iron in your throat [that] eating harbors," inviting an unspoken restrictive modifier using "that": iron that *eating* harbors. Curiously, the purpose of restrictive

modifiers beginning with "that" is to point out or identify their noun referent. That naming function is only implied here. In other words, the line could refer to the trace amounts of a mineral that eating meals withholds or "harbors." Like maintaining iron in the diet, to speak clearly of the world requires a digestive distillation of experience that at best yields a trace, an essence. Both distinct readings seem compatible in Ratcliffe's open form. Rather than committing to a determinate meaning for this jarring image, perhaps what Ratcliffe asks is that readers balance several. The passage poses more questions than it answers: what does this disjunctive juxtaposition make present? How does thinking accommodate disjunction? Within disjunctive juxtapositions, language manifests for thinkers their own synthetic if not acrobatic processes: the flexibility to maintain contraries simultaneously, to intuit connections where none seem possible, and to commit to the process of interpretation without necessitating a determinate, exclusive meaning. Disjunction promotes a kind of negative capability, remarking not the end of meaning but horizons for the unforeseen.

"To speak of this" is the role of "someone" defined in lines 8 and 9 as "a completely / important guest becoming a corner." The milieu of the poem transforms this valued person into a place inobtrusive and hidden; conversely, corners also uphold the integrity of a room, giving form and proportion to space. The poem, too, upholds the polarity of connotations for "corner." The statement "she knows" stands out in line 9 without the demarcation of punctuation. The splicing posed at the end of line 9 could refer to the ". . . corner she knows" or could point forward to read "she knows / how you move." In either case, the woman has access to another state of being about which the reader has only partial knowledge. Like the character of truth, the poem simultaneously reveals and withholds. Similarly, the dash and the word "already" are bi-directional in their referents, and, as with "she knows," this invites a double reading of the section, underscoring in it the character of language that at once speaks and upon return harbors the "unsaid."

As the world presents itself, so language makes available a formal response. For example, "already" completely in place is the relationship among objects suggested in lines 11-14: "the objects (random indeed) feeling among others a music like the noise / thought preserved among others who drive at times to a form / more of spaces in the light said to be where one / comes from . . . ." Again, parity configures the relationship between "feeling" random objects and the "others" who, presumably sentient, pursue "a form": in a perhaps satiric reversal, the objects of

experience "feel" "music"—a thoughtful coherence—akin to the less
harmonic "noise" of human thought, particularly thought as it is "pre-
served" by a certain kind of "other." Perhaps the "other" is a poet. Why?
Because, at best, the poet's "noisy" form equals the "music" the world
presents. Distinctive, too, is the fact that the poet's response is self-dis-
closive, revealing her/his own condition as "more of spaces in the light
said to be where one / comes from." To return to Heidegger's notion of
openness, those "spaces" afford *a priori* human understanding the
opportunity to bring to light the original character of the human mode
of being. The poet names the place "where one / comes from." Thought
drives human beings to an apprehension of their *a priori* openness in the
direction of the other: not coincidentally, the form of Ratcliffe's poetic
proposition is wrought with similar openness.

However, for all the "noise" that thought provokes, it is "without
means of changing the person in the door" in line 14. The poet's ability
to influence others is limited. To change, the unknown other in the door
must *act* upon thought. Perhaps the individual is too preoccupied to
change, having lost her/his "keys" in the new grass, as noted in lines 15
and 16. The process of ferreting out the keys metamorphoses within the
context of the environment: as "the temperature drops," finding one key
seems like finding five, becoming painfully elongated in the cold night.
It is from the confusion of searching for keys in the dark—an image
with obvious metaphoric dimensions—that the poem moves to closure.

"To become noise" at the beginning of line 17 seems an abrupt tran-
sition. Does the "temperature" drop "to become noise"? Does the night
air freeze the scene of lost keys into an emblematic form like "the noise
thought preserved"? Or does this phrase have another referent? Again
Ratcliffe asks readers to re-think their place in the poem—to re-trace
their steps. Perhaps the phrase returns readers to those "others" in line
12 who "drive at times to a form," across an expanse of qualifiers, *to
become noise* in line 17. The poem may return to those thinkers who, in
locating their own being, become *themselves* "noise"; they are self-disclo-
sive, a transparent thinking of their world preserved in bodies and in
language.

In so asserting, the speaker asks us to take "notice" in line 17: "notice
the falls of color beyond reach / of one surface solid as the next . . . ."
Mutability characterizes the physical landscape, with various hues pour-
ing into one another in the distance. Again, ambiguity marks the word
"falls"—perhaps the speaker refers to seasons of autumn long passed,
"beyond reach." In either case, this place evidences change. Noteworthy

is the appositional structure of lines 18 and 19: "one surface solid as the next" is renamed by the appositive, "the remnants / say 'of poetry'." Earlier in the poem, human beings were manifested as things among other things, without particular stature. In lines 18 and 19, the remains of what some external or authoritative source (since the words are quoted) defines as being "of poetry" are characterized, like objects, by solid surfaces. The character of poetry here becomes palpable, a real thing of this world among other things—an example of what Gadamer describes as poetry being that which it intends. And for poetry's sake or for those remnants that "speak" of poetry ("say 'of poetry'") there is a "hearing": a listening to Being that in line 19 "sounds / as if your voice." Being speaks to the "you" addressed in the poem and is heard through that "you." The hearing and voice fuse and are about to go forward in line 21 "in the white that seems to echo pleasure." Perhaps the image here suggests a poetic thinker poised upon the empty white page. This whiteness stands ready to receive the "falls of color" that bespeak the world. But this relationship is less oppositional than complementary: a solid white surface amplifies the "noisy" delight of listening and saying. The poem's final line, however, undercuts the anticipated "echo" and returns the reader to the transient nature of even the finest perceptions.

Like so many other passages in section 18, line 22 is ambiguous: "should open the gates she notes by morning, light-blown, melts away." Both "hearing" from line 19 and "voice" from line 20 are probable referents that "should open the gates"—should provide access through what appears a boundary, be those "gates" a commonplace, and so perhaps blindly restrictive, way of thinking or being. At the poem's conclusion, the important guest reappears and, in addition to the poem's implied speaker, becomes the only "other" to say anything in this section. Her intimate knowledge of "you"—recall, "she knows / how you move" in lines 9 and 10—is coupled with her awareness of the gates. But should readers separate *what* she notes from *who* she is, heeding the advice in lines 4 and 5? Readers know precious little about either: instead, they are plummeted into mystery. The encounter with Being vaporizes in the poem's closing phrase, "by morning, light-blown, melts away." The return to morning brings unusual consequences: the "you" of direct address in the poem is no longer dogged by "light-bound" (l. 5) neon orange. Instead, morning is "light-blown"—in an oddly positive hyphenation, blasted open by intense brilliance or, in a more negative sense, dissipated like a burst 100-watt bulb. The promise of morning binds these polarities and withholds all possibilities. However, morning

light does not hold sway but instead "melts away." Or could ."melts away" be a second verb, far across qualifiers, for the subject "voice"? The voice *that* implicitly "should open the gates" merely "melts away." The voice that names the address of Being, conveying its "music" as "noise"—is barely audible, withholding the world's bold presence. Here Ratcliffe closes a deliberately tangled path, relinquishing the choice of how to negotiate it to the reader.

In *Disjunctive Poetics*, Peter Quartermain offers what has become a typical description of experimental poetics, one that easily could be applied to Ratcliffe's verse:

> The increasing mismatch between such semantic elements as sentence pattern, repetition, voice, and context so undermines ordinary decoding procedures that the reader is forced to take account of both the individual particulars (each separate word) and the totality in which those words appear (the whole text). In effect, such work presents islands of localised meaning . . . . (17)

Quartermain's definition is apt, but does it fully account for readers' engagement? Ratcliffe's poetry provides less the insularity of Quartermain's "islands" but more an invitation to the processes of thinking in their richness and variety. In *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, George Hartley describes the reader's relationship to experimental verse:

> Language writing is often posed as an attempt to draw the reader into the production process by leaving the connections between various elements open, thus allowing the reader to produce the connections between those elements. In this way, presumably, the reader recognizes his or her part in the social process of production. But just as important, the ambiguity of the structure of many of these poems should remind the reader that any connections drawn are arbitrary. (xiii)

When readers acknowledge their parts in some sort of identifiable "social process of production," do they realize their own thinking as *arbitrary*? Do readers or poets ever really present themselves *without* intentions, even within the immediacy of interpretation? Hartley's claim dilutes the hermeneutic character of readers as participants in the poem's making. Quartermain defines the immediacy that, like arbitrariness, distinguishes the experimental project, noting that in such verse,

> . . . things stand in no clear relationship to one another save contiguity. Much of the syntax is paratactic, for parataxis forces the read-

er to build hierarchies on no authority other than her own or his
own. Hence the only firm thing to hold on to in the poem, that
holds the writing together, is not *meaning* in the sense of an encap-
sulation which can be separated out, cashed in at the end of the
reading in exchange for the knowledge-claim that "this is what the
poem means," but *language*, the voices, the play in and of language,
the dialogue with the poem taking place in the reader's conscious-
ness, moving toward some sort of cognition and recognition of
meaning and structure which cannot be separated from the deci-
sions made within the writing/reading. (19)

This passage clearly identifies Quartermain's deconstructive valorization
of meaning's indeterminacy, characterizing the "play" of language as if it
were something animate and apart. Language, however, bespeaks the
world, *is* the world in its articulated form, and that world, for better or
worse, is structured for thinkers in ways they may come to apprehend
but in ways that never afford them release. Readers cannot bracket or
"objectively" stand apart from their world or culture in their reading.
And must a sense of cultural heritage necessarily assert hegemony and
deny the immediacy of perception esteemed by Language poets as the
heart of both the poet's composition and the reader's act of re-making
that composition? Is not every instant of immediacy foregrounded by all
the thinker has become within the world? Deconstructive critics like
Quartermain and Hartley dichotomize readers as either slaves to tradi-
tion or slates brushed blank by Language poetry's "socialist critique"
(Hartley xv). Experimental poets like Ratcliffe work to reveal what is
essentially human: that is, his work encourages readers to participate in
an experience with language that returns them to the process of being
themselves, inviting them to negotiate their relationship to the world of
the poem from their own standpoints. Groundless immediacy undercuts
the primacy of language and alienates readers from a world which they,
by nature of simply being human, *must* occupy.

Clearly, Ratcliffe's form requires both a reiterative reading strategy and
a metadiscourse better-suited to the borderland between poetry and phi-
losophy. Its openness demands that readers confront choices in language
as they would choices in the world. Management of the ambiguity and
general ineffability of words comes to constitute a stance in relation not
just to this poem but to how readers construct meaning. This reaffirms
Charles Bernstein's comparison in which the structure of discourse in
both poetry and philosophy remains always value-engendering and is
"never assumable." Nothing is easily assumable in any of Ratcliffe's

works. The experience his poetry fosters for readers is an intimately philosophical one. Ratcliffe asks that readers define and redefine for themselves the simplest terms of their being: "name and address." He unravels the traditional structure of the statement to afford his readers an encounter with openness that both remakes their being-in-the-world in its philosophical dimensions and encourages their own poetic intuition.

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