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Review: Stephen Ratcliffe, *Real* (Avenue B 2007)

If the modern long poem is frequently read as a remaking of the epic, it must be, as William Carlos Williams says in his 1951 preface to *Paterson*, that “the poem is also the search of the poet for his language.” Williams speaks to the desire to write a long poem using one’s *own* poetic language, language that might “gain a verisimilitude with the object I had in mind.” But he also seeks to use the rushing, watery noise of the Passaic Falls, which Williams says “seemed to me to be a language which we were and are seeking.” The falls, a kind of common source-language for the “we” of the city, became for Williams an access-point to the “object” he had in (his own) mind. *Paterson*, which famously declares that there are “no ideas but in things,” in its preface semantically links the thingness in the poem with the cultural work of poetry, work which includes the poem’s objective as well as its objects. Williams actually begins that well-known line by commanding, “Say it”—a gesture, perhaps, against the impulse to see poetics as bounded by a notion of the page as silent surface.

This impulse would likewise be resisted by the California poet (and surfer) Stephen Ratcliffe, whose 2000 book of criticism, *Listening to Reading*, explores the relationships between sound, sense, meaning, and poetry. Ratcliffe has also long been a poet-critic interested in poetry’s relationship to daily life, and his new book *REAL* continues a longstanding project to “give shape to things” in his writing by creating poems from what he sees every morning from his Bolinas home. *REAL*, a 474-page work written March 15, 2000-July 1, 2001, takes up after *Portraits and Repetition* (Post-Apollo Press), written February 9, 1998-May 28, 1999. Ratcliffe completed the manuscript for *REAL* before beginning work on *Cloud / Ridge*, written July 2, 2001-October 18, 2002, to be followed by *Human / Nature*, written October 19, 2002-July 15, 2005. The dates should be enough to indicate the significant commitment of these poems; each manuscript, though bounded and self-sufficient in formal ways, literally begins just as another long series of daily poesis has ended.

The result is an “ongoingness” (to borrow a term from Dee Morris) in poems whose intense regularity frames continually generative observations. Ratcliffe’s poetry of daily living treats objects, shapes, colors, people, animals, memory, and the self in more or less equivalent registers and treats form as a procedural grid: in this case, poems of seventeen lines each, set in Courier so as to better control the

shape and insist upon textual regularity. As a long poem, *REAL* exhibits much of the genre hybridity ascribed to the tradition in American poetry: these pieces, and their related projects, have been variously described as serial poems, epics, documentaries, essays, translations, or musical scores. Ratcliffe, whose engagement with Gertrude Stein was most pronounced in *Portraits and Repetition*, frequently employs similar tactics of recursivity and portraiture in these pieces as well. In their “dailiness,” the poems claim a genealogy with work by Larry Eigner and James Schuyler. More chronicling than epiphanic, they also evoke works by poets like Bernadette Mayer who record, dramatize, or otherwise register how the materiality of language shapes empirical meaning.

Yet unlike these other poets, whose works are often restlessly hybridic, one of the first things one notices about these poems is their uniform appearance on the page, and anyone who has heard Ratcliffe read from this manuscript might attest that their sound, both on the page and in performance, is soothingly regular, pulseline. Consider the relatively straightforward beginning of a poem early in the book:

3.21

The horizontal line of the white cloud above  
which a blue field of sky, which takes place  
after a grid of windows on the floor opposite  
the person looking at it. The sound of action  
from below the listener who walks into the room  
hearing it, turning the corner of the building  
into wind coming down from above it. The man  
standing on a sidewalk to the right of the woman  
facing him. [...]

Like many of the poems, this one appears “painterly,” as if the day were a wall in a museum. The dispassionate description and relative equivalence of disparate parts—sky, building, person (who may or may not be the speaker), “sound of action,” and other people—flatten the portrait. One could say that these are the formal choices that make these poems “everyday”; whatever association is happening in the lines is happening in their present moment. Yet as much as the poem is all perspective, there is really no perspective at all. The view out the window gives way to a sound overheard outside the room (perhaps Mill was right about poetry?), but the listener may or may not possess the view outside the window. And who is looking at the man and woman on the sidewalk? These questions of perspective are constantly being troubled, as otherwise straightforward as they might be in their transcription of what is seen and heard.

At the same time, this placid immediacy gives way to greater depth, especially in poems that range across the senses and linger on their images before swerving to the next within the poem's observational range:

5.1

Articulation of "A" on the violin's string  
inside the person thinking it, whose sound  
doesn't actually reappear. Girl positioned  
in front of the man on an armored horse not  
speaking, to the left of which a stone bowl  
tilted toward a flat white rock above the grey-  
white one. The man on his knees in the shade  
beside the fence pulling up tall green grass,  
the evaporation of an invisible car's sound  
passing in the street. A rectangular blue  
silence in the corner of a painting on a wall  
above an empty wooden chair, parallel to meaning  
piled up in a mound behind the listener who only  
thinks he hears it. The man's right leg across  
the back of the woman's stone thigh, following  
action of the bird taking off from the branch  
on the left.

The first few lines semantically trouble the poem's portraiture: the A string's sound is being remembered, not heard (Zukofsky hovering somewhere nearby), but it seems to be the person's *own* sound that does not reappear. A few lines down, an invisible car makes a sound that evaporates: invisible, probably, because not seen from this perspective, but the abstract terms of description prepare us for the "appearance" of "meaning" itself, which is, again, not really heard though it has color, dimension, and orientation. The poem seems to be painting silence by tracing the shapes left by its absence. It's easy enough to write a poem about remembered sound, but "5.1" instead enacts silence by making it visual.

"5.1" includes images that recur throughout *REAL*: girl, man, stone bowl, a woman's stone thigh and a man's leg across it, bird on branch. These sorts of repetition augment the dailiness of the poems and leave some narrative effects: the bird travels from branch to branch; a dead frog appears on the floor one day, is covered with ants the next; a girl has trouble getting in and out of Manhattan and has charged conversations on the telephone with a woman. Even so, these repeated elements are never explicated or reflected upon but always dropped in, as if it were simply most appropriate to see them there, at that time. "8.26" comments wryly on this method:

[...]Man in short-sleeved green  
and blue shirt insisting you can't shift point  
of view in mid-sentence, water from sprinkler  
whose sound arrives from the left of the wall  
adjacent to the top of stone steps above green  
extending horizontally below it. [...]

As much as the poems resist perspective, they often deal intensely with the body,  
its urges and frailties, as in these two August poems:

8.6

[...]Blond-haired girl  
speaking about her aunt's recovery from heat  
stroke, woman in Spokane who can't remember  
hospital restraints. Angle of pink-orange  
sunlight at top of ridge after the wind stops,  
yellowjacket disappearing [...]

8.10

air's space enclosing darkest red campion flower  
around which the man in a light blue shirt wraps  
his right hand. Man at the far end of the table  
recalling coming home each day to an empty house,  
getting stoned and getting layed. [...]

Like the man in the green and blue shirt said, you're not supposed to shift point of view in mid-sentence, but in defying that wisdom by linking its scenes paratactically, Ratcliffe's lines create a sort of tensile space in which an array of sensual experiences carry as much weight as the objects they are frequently linked with. After a few hundred pages, blank equivalence cedes ground to a reading experience that is almost trancelike, and the effect is intensely moving (again, to cite Stein). The movement in this trance is not an interior one, but one that is fully exterior. Ratcliffe's radically observational mode produces a smooth portraitlike surface upon which perspectival shifts segue in ways that might otherwise lack coherence.

It is worth considering how we would unpack the cumulative effect of these poems. Given the fundamental formal tension between each dispatch of seventeen lines and the book's 474 pages, how are we to describe what happens inside the book's large shifts that might not really be shifts at all? *Portraits and Repetition*,

474 pages of couplets (five in each poem), deals with the same issue. If, like Williams, Ratcliffe is looking for language in *REAL*, perhaps that is because this is one of the things the long poem demands. Is Stephen Ratcliffe's *REAL* the *Bolinas* to Williams's *Paterson*? I'm tempted to compare the waves of the Pacific and *REAL*'s scenes of surfing to the Passaic Falls, but it might be more productive to say that if there is one tradition that Ratcliffe and Williams share, it has more to do with the utopian possibilities of the long poem. In its audacity, its impulses toward containment and expansion, the modern long poem might not create "new epics" as much as it troubles the notion of quest inherent in the genre. By continuing Ratcliffe's new sort of daily perspective, *REAL* suggests that the quest belongs to everyone engaged with how language deals with the real.