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'Something like words for | motion': Ian Patterson's *Shell Vestige Disputed*

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Collecting four sequences of poems composed over the last three years, including the largely unpublished 'Home James', Ian Patterson's *Shell Vestige Disputed* unashamedly sets us the task of making sense of it. We are left with hints and guesses:

> The street took all sense but he didn't pass the
> end so much as gain consciousness of a question
> reflected such as to step on another state he found.
>
> Time on the spot would connect the object matter
> in a letter so far as the question was back, studied
> and cold, each closer day dreamed as apprehension.[1]

What should we make of this series of opaque observations and reflections, composed in what might strike an unfamiliar reader at first as a peculiarly rapid form of shorthand? Looked at again, these stanzas constitute two remarkably sustained syntactical performances, whose respective hypotaxis and parataxis are, however, hard to construe: a crisscrossing of a remembered past tense and second-order commentary that in each case leaves their speaker's temporal location uncertain. This figure's spatial movement in the first stanza, although similarly occluded, provides one route into the poem, while at the same time introducing its own form of hesitancy. I find myself liable to fall foul of 'to step on', with what might be sensed as its apparently incomplete preposition, and leaning into it conversely seems to risk trampling over the poem entire.

Nonetheless, the poem's preoccupation with the dynamics of bodily movement might point to its potential connection to that of verse; much like the work of another poet, it appears energised by 'what [might] happen if rhyme came back in to do a lot of the running', as in the wonderful rattle created here between 'matter' and 'letter'.[2] Daunting, even minatory at first (affects neatly registered by the volume's title), the poems collected here may perhaps sustain other modes of reading that can dispense with these adjectives. Thinking about the particular transitions enabled by the movements of verse, with its simultaneously intuitive and abstracted relationship to bodily motion, I would like to suggest, might provide one way into reading these poems differently.

Of course, the primary location in which this kind of avant-garde practice has been read and disseminated is the academy, and, until his retirement in 2018, Patterson seems to have enjoyed a fruitful mutuality between his work as a poet and his employment as

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[1] From 'Implacable Grasp', *Shell Vestige Disputed* (Fair View: Broken Sleep Books, 2023), p. 16. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

[2] R.F. Langley, 'Note' (1994) in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Jeremy Noel-Tod (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2015), xvii.

lecturer in English at Cambridge. In addition to his poetry's obvious sympathies with that of the so-called Cambridge School (a loose affiliation of poets including J.H. Prynne, Veronica Forrest-Thompson, Peter Riley, Denise Riley, Andrew Crozier, and Anna Mendlessohn, possibly), much of his teaching appears to have been directed by the particular problems posed by contemporary poetry. Attending a graduate seminar run by Patterson entitled 'Reading Difficult Poetry', Emily Witt recalled his 'grave but friendly demeanour' in teaching Louis Zukofsky's 'A'-9.[3] Drawing on the example of the French surrealists, and perhaps as well their few contemporary followers in England (David Gascoyne, Hugh Sykes Davies, George Barker), Patterson's early poetry consorts with the dislocations of sense and essentially playful attitude to language these writers encouraged.[4]

This sort of poetry, a late or belated modernism, must have seemed more marginal then than it does now, when much of contemporary poetry can be seen to inherit its 'state of uncertainty about the meaningful statements', and itself operates within 'a state of questioning what sort of object […] language has become'.[5] Patterson's repeated querying of language has also found its sustenance from another quarter, in his work as a translator of texts including Charles Fourier's *The Theory of the Four Movements* (Cambridge, 1996) and the sixth volume of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, entitled 'Finding Time Again' (Penguin, 2003). As in Proust's prose, the poems collected here pivot around the mind's efforts to recover past reality out of the elaborate distortions of memory:

> Silly desire for instant stress care pushed the will past any
> ground of his feet so the word might be only measure
> or manner formed like sense rising in arms and legs by resort
> to vision, staring up his sleeve, to appeal for company as
> > shade breath on impressions of motion.
> […]
> Patch over feet in time, save the present show to breathe
> instant means in the measure of chill felt from talking about
> being minded to figure a body lurking and wanting in time
> by the nick of fear. Renewal of vision, the house in the lapse
> > already out with why the world looked ill.
>
> ('Tight Orbits', 24-5)

Largely forgoing punctuation, the poem offers rhythm as the primary means for readers to orient themselves in this journey through 'the revenant logic of things returned to us, but not in the way we expected'.[6] Connections appear lighted upon via prosody, as the poet takes his line for a walk, circling an elusive 'present'. Yet while we might therefore see the beginnings of an ambulatory poetic emerge here—not dissimilar to Wordsworth pacing up and down the garden of Dove Cottage or Wallace Stevens composing on his walks to and from the insurance office—the verse-movement of these hexameters is insistently syncopated, jogged out of an accompanying regularity of step.

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[3] Emily Witt, 'That Room in Cambridge', *N+1*, 11, 2011.

[4] Much of Patterson's early poetry is handily collected in *Time to Get Here: Selected Poems, 1969-2002* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003). A *Collected Poems* is forthcoming from Broken Sleep Books.

[5] Peter Middleton, 'Warring Clans, Podsolized Ground: Language in Contemporary UK Poetry', in *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today,* ed. by Abigail Lang and David Nowell-Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 17-36 (p. 36).

[6] Ian Penman, *Fassbinder: Thousands of Mirrors* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2023), p. 71.

As a result, the poem's first line seems to not so much gracefully stride (*enjamber*) as lurch over the line-break into its successor, likening its speaker's uncertain perceptual field to the poem's unsettled prosodical one. If, as T.J. Clark has argued, the attention of certain painters to 'the contact between upright man and the groundplane' can be seen to reveal the latter's role as 'a limit condition of the human […] a world in itself, level and yet not level, firm and yet locally unreliable, fissured, fractured, intricate', might something similar be said for certain negotiations of poetic form, poised between metrical groundplan and the individual poem's grounding in a singular movement of feet?[7]

The observation of a strict identity between stanzaic limits and syntactical closure in much of the sequence provides one means of throwing such rhythmic figures into relief. Between the iconic dimension of the poems' stanzas, as shapes or layouts, and the dynamic rhythmical assemblages that unfold within them, we seem to arrive at a doubled-sided idea of poetic form as at once time-bound and timeless. On the one hand, 'form stops us in our tracks […] and inserts itself in that moment'.[8] On the other, it reveals itself, in rhythm, as 'the improvisation that moves each limited body in play with a world'.[9] Their contention is that poetic rhythm is something that we might think with, and that, in order to do so, we have to see its relationship to bodily motion anew.

In a recent interview with Keston Sutherland, Patterson characterised the poems as 'attempts to complicate the fairly simple business of thinking, but not to offer the results of thinking. I want them to *be* thinking, not to *have* thought'.[10] This off-the-cuff remark itself carries something of what he had earlier described as his poems' habit of 'doing both', a double pun worth unpacking. The poems are not containers for 'thoughts' or completed acts of cognition past perfect, but rather harbour thinking in progress, themselves constitute a form of thinking. This sense of thought as peculiarly entangled with bodily movement, as itself in constant motion, falls in with another touchstone Patterson cited in this interview, namely Maurice Merleau-Ponty's suggestive remarks on 'the strange mode of existence enjoyed by the object behind our backs'.[11] Estranging everyday perception along such lines, the poems plot a disorientating path through orientated space, tracking the doubled capacity of the world throughout this progress to both reveal itself and render itself opaque:

> Air as element laid bare past service, dropped straight
>   from a kind time, missing turns in a deeper care as
>   time sank in price tables despoiled without the aid of style.
>
> Brush shadows into shapes like iron and oak, held moments

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[7] T. J. Clark, *Painting at Ground Level: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, delivered at Princeton University April 17-19, 2002, p. 135. Accessible here: https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/c/clark_2002.pdf.

[8] Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 21.

[9] Lisa Robertson, *The Baudelaire Fractal* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2020), p. 184.

[10] 'Ian Patterson & Keston Sutherland: Shell Vestige Disputed', *London Review of Books,* 28 February 2023 https://www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/podcasts-video/podcasts/ian-patterson-keston-sutherland-shell-vestige-disputed [accessed 1 August 2023]

[11] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012 [1945]), p. 29.

> Saved in so far as they suggest sparse render in lived wrong things
>   a tongue above all matters to test as it happened.
>
> <div align="right">('Lapsed Step', 18)</div>

Their bipedal metric in this way involves the possibility of the reader wandering erroneously, 'missing turns' and subsequently having to retrace their steps. The poem's packed collocations force us into a vexed positionality, making us wonder whether, for instance, we should regard 'brush shadows into shapes' as an imperative or a present-tense action, or both. We walk the line and in the process arrive at incommensurable aspects of it. Likewise 'in so far', presented in its original, uncompounded form, seems to flicker between its prepositional, adverbial and conjunctive components. Patterson's 'busy prepositions', as for Wordsworth, serve 'as the stride of his thought', but in following on their trail here we are likely to be pulled up by them.[12]

A 'lapsed step' consequently serves as a fitting analogy for these moments of deliberate semantic or prosodic disbalancing; it was with the latter in mind that Coleridge described such disruptions as 'like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a stair-case, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four'.[13] However, in a Benjaminian essay on selling his library for the *London Review of Books*, Patterson used this figure differently to illustrate the workings of involuntary memory, characterising the loss of these objects as being 'caught unawares by things that weren't there any more. Stretching out my hand to turn on the red anglepoise on my desk when I'd already taken it home was like missing the last step when you're going downstairs'.[14] 'Home James' also partakes of this uncanny relationship to past reading. As related in Patterson's interview with Sutherland, the sequence was composed using words taken out of a copy of Henry James' *The Sacred Fount* (1901); a more radical extension of the compositional procedure (or *procédé*) of textual bricolage he has used throughout his career (see in particular the wonderful sequence 'Hardihood' (2003), written out of words taken solely from Thomas Hardy's *Collected Poems*). This peculiar provenance need not invalidate readers' experience of the sequence without this knowledge (one reason to broach it here last), but it does perhaps force us to ask questions about how it alters our engagement with them. In order to do so, we should have a look at the strange mode of existence enjoyed by the text behind these poems.

Limiting the vocabulary of the sequence to words drawn from James' novel functions as a form of aleatory constraint, the eye scanning the page desultorily and selecting the words which will make up the poem (perhaps with some latitude; 'mirage', 'payee', 'bovine', and 'cell-effect' all seem to have come from elsewhere). Yet it may also be seen to open up an intertextual relation between the two texts, and with it the possibility of one text misrecognising or misremembering another:

> [M]ark your mind while I speak as I say, being so on the spot.
> Where consciousness did grow up to the outer state, crude
> symptom of some note of observation given for the fact
> of exposure, these pressed each recognition of what surged up

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[12] John Jones, *The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954), p. 206.

[13] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 254.

[14] Ian Patterson, 'My Books', *London Review of Books,* 41(13), 4 July 2019.

> as apprehension as if pursued by that glare, a disguise reflected.
>
> A gasp for weight, transparent spots blur the light, walls in
> The dark reach things and pinch even to face the idea
> of balance, poor spark to complain of spirit shade and piece
> words from the ground, the object world of broken touch.
>
> ('Bedevilled Terms', 31)

Fragments of what we may or may not recognise as Jamesiana ('on the spot', 'some note of observation', 'consciousness') in this way seem to interpolate a prior, semi-remembered text ahead of our engagement with these lines. Reading as a result seems to undergo a process of distraction, 'at once an abstraction from […] surrounding objects, and therefore capable perhaps of linking them conceptually', which nonetheless can only relate them as moments in time, as an unspooled series of implications embodied in the flow of the line.[15] Such connections point inward, to an introjected 'object world of broken touch'. In an article for *Thinking Verse* concerning John James' poetic sequence *Letters from Sarah* (Street Editions, 1973), a series of misheard and fragmentary translations from Tristan Tzara, Patterson discussed the possibilities opened up by such attempts at 'making a readable poem out of a hallucinated reading of another poem'.[16] As a form of 'carrying-over', not from Tzara's French to James' English but from the Master's prose to Patterson's particular cadence, we might see 'Home James' as implying a wider movement of temporal progression in addition to the local routes sketched out of the poems' ambulatory rhythms.

Similar acts of transmission were integral to the initial formation of poetic modernism, ranging from Baudelaire's translations of Poe and Laforgue's adaptions of Whitman to Pound's later persona-driven versions of ancient Chinese lyric and classical elegy in *Cathay* (1917) and *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919) respectively. As Patterson has written, this 'historical or mythological ventriloquism' should be seen as 'not merely a response to or a reflection of modernity, but an expression of a new historical epistemology, a need to be situated in an open relation to futurity'.[17] Like the other sequences in *Shell Vestige Disputed*, with their interest in repurposing the sonnet form ('To Account For') or probing pastoral convention ('A Space Based on Hearsay', 'Imaginary Sky'), 'Home James' consequently seems to revisit the late modernist form of the free or experimental translation. If such attention paid to prior, possibly outmoded forms provides, as Edward Allen observes, 'a crucial countermeasure to the activity of periodisation', then we might see the translational techniques employed in *Shell Vestige Disputed* as offering similar resistance to linear historicisation.[18] Risking the dated, Patterson's late style here instead contemplates the reader's role in ensuring the poems' temporal progress.

That this anachronism is ultimately generous rather than minatory might then be put down to the sequence's participation in this adaptive lineage, and the particular mode of reading it encourages. Clive Scott, a fellow writer in this tradition, conceptualises translative

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[15] Anne Stillman, 'Distraction Fits', *Thinking Verse,* 2 (2012), 27–67 (p. 28).

[16] Ian Patterson, 'Langue-in-Cheek', *Thinking Verse* 4 (ii) (2014), 67–79 (p. 69).

[17] Ian Patterson, 'Time, Free Verse, and the Gods of Modernism' in *Tradition, Translation, Trauma: The Classic and the Modern*, ed. by Jane Parker and Timothy Matthews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 175–90 (p. 178).

[18] Edward Allen, 'Too Late for Lyric Studies?', in *Forms of Late Modernist Lyric*, ed. by Allen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), pp. 1–12 (p. 10).

reading in terms of the '[s]ensory involvement in text' manifested in the work of translation, defined in contrast to what he disapprovingly names 'the web of concessive interpretation'.[19] Rather than solicit the ultimately antagonistic process of decoding and ratifying polysemy commonly afforded texts in the wake of literary criticism's modernisation, akin to the 'ruthless analysis' practiced by James' narrator (a not so distant relative of the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)), 'Home James' likewise seems to actively invite the reader's physical involvement in tracking across its opaque surface.[20] As a modality of translation, reading thus serves as 'the vehicle by which the [poem] makes progress through the time and space it did not know at its birth'; 'For progress occurs through re-inventing | These words from a dim recollection of them', as John Ashbery has it.[21] It is by such means that the sequence, as one of its concluding poems has it, offers us

> the issue of thought in light and
> proportion about conscious hours repeated as
> perversity again, passing sharply after an instant
> exposed to fear, to flutter more than his lips could tell.
> Each well-kept approach would help free our exchange
> of touch and find the world ready in divided awkwardness.
>
> ('Peep Contact', 35)

Warding off the inevitable anxious '"flutter" to get the difficult poem right, to fix its flux, *Shell Vestige Disputed* looks to the collaborative exchange between writer and reader as the form in which poetry's spatiotemporal mobility might be embodied. Drafting in this way might be a condition of reading as well as writing, requiring that we wager misrecognising ourselves as well as the text before us. In doing so, we might find ourselves stepping out of the poem and into the world, seeing it afresh, resplendent in 'divided awkwardness'.

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[19] Clive Scott, *Translating Rimbaud's* Illuminations (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 18.

[20] Henry James, *The Sacred Fount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 21.

[21] Scott, *Translating*, p. 31; John Ashbery, 'Blue Sonata' (1977), *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, ed. by Mark Ford (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010), p. 533. (One Proustian poet in the hands of another).