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Constructing the long now

Stephen Ratcliffe's 'sound of wave in channel'

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sound of wave in channel

Stephen Ratcliffe

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“[T]he principle of *rhyme*” Stephen Ratcliffe once wrote, “describes the relationship of identities unified by a strong but imperfect likeness . . . parts and patterns whose simultaneous likeness and unlikeness pull them simultaneously together and apart.” It “recurs in every artistic relationship in all media,” forming “the common denominator of all aesthetic pleasure.”[1] Ratcliffe’s *sound of wave in channel*, the fifth of his series of 1000-page books and the first to be published in codex form, exemplifies the principle—and the pleasure—at every scale.[2]

As in the previous books, *sound of wave in channel* collects poems assembled daily (here from October 1, 2013 through June 26, 2016) according to a fixed form:

3.29

whiteness of cloud above still shadowed
plane of ridge, red-tailed hawk calling
in foreground, sound of wave in channel

printed image light, four
of the same subject

what was being written or,
surrounded, present

sunlit white cloud above shadowed ridge
whiteness of wave breaking into channel

In this book the four stanzas comprise three sections. The first, containing three lines of 39 monospaced characters, records the view from Ratcliffe's house on waking, looking out over the Bolinas Ridge. The last, of two 39-character lines, depicts the view from Bolinas Bay at the Overlook.[3] The two middle stanzas alternate longer (25-28 characters) and shorter (19-21 characters) lines, forming a wavelike shape. These stanzas are composed of what Ratcliffe calls "pre-measured units" using words and phrases harvested from books he was reading at the time.

Imperfect likeness appears as repetition with a difference. Within the fixed form, the first word(s) of line two are always either "ridge" or a noun phrase including "ridge." Either "foreground" or "in foreground" begins line three in all 1000 poems, including the four from March 2014 that open with an urban view because Ratcliffe was traveling.[4] Similarly, Ratcliffe enjambes the first and second lines of each poem, so that the syntactic units, like musical phrases, push across the rhythmic grid (in interviews he has invoked Mondrian). Thus a single comma appears in the second and third lines of each poem, and the shorter final syntactic unit brings the opening section to rest.

The first phrase observes the condition of the sky and distant landscape (light, fog, ridge), followed in the second phrase by objects, which may be remote (planet) or audible (towhee's "oh"), in the foreground. The closing phrase reports the sound, or absence of sound, of water in "the channel," a surf break at the inlet to Bolinas Lagoon (or of cars in urban streets).

The indented middle stanzas also play syntax against lineation, with the first line requiring one comma and the second line two, in variable positions. Only in the final stanza do the line's extent and its single unit of meaning coincide, as the measure returns to the original 39 characters.

Such a tripartite structure can usefully be compared to ternary form in music: an opening statement of key, a modulation, and a return to the initial key. The final two lines signal a satisfying closure in three ways: semantically, by returning to the opening's recording of observed fact; visually, by reprising the opening measure of 39 characters; and tonally, by repeating the form's only semantically and syntactically coincident line format. The effect is analogous to a cadence concluding with a repeated tonic chord.

Sound, as in musical effect, is important to Ratcliffe. Without attempting to rival his book-length anatomizing of a single Thomas Campion song, we can sample the dense phonetic patterning in the poem reproduced above: the obvious *foreground/sound/surrounded* internal rhyme, echoing the diphthong in *cloud*; alliteration of *ridge/red-tailed* and *same/subject*; *four/or* end rhyme; conceptual rhyme of *light/sunlit*; repetition of *whiteness* at the beginning of the first and last lines and of *channel* at the end of the first and last stanzas, reinforcing closure. There are many more phonetic and rhythmic correspondences across the poem, including individual consonants and vowel-plus-consonant-sound pairs both duplicated and inverted. And as the reader moves from poem to poem, a line may change by only a word or two across several poems (it's tempting to say over several days), expanding the principle of imperfect likeness across the book while interlacing sonic effects. All this of course refers to the private "sound" we construct with auditory memory when we read silently to ourselves; analogous and additional effects accrue when we [listen to Ratcliffe read the poems aloud](#).

Ratcliffe's work has often been described as a contemplative practice, as 'meditative.'^[5] Another model for the structure of the poems in *sound of wave in channel* is more precisely analogous to formal *vipassana*, mindfulness, or insight meditation: observational focus on a physical phenomenon (breath, shadowed ridge) interrupted by thoughts arising in the 'monkey mind' (conceptual language harvested from reading) which are noted and released as focus returns to observed phenomena.

Is Ratcliffe's daily practice, which generates the poems, part of the work of art (*sound of wave in channel* or the larger ongoing series)? It is not the text, though most readers who know his texts know of his practice. But it haunts the text, as Richard Long's shaped walks in the wild haunt the texts that record them.

This question of how the words relate to the world has exercised Ratcliffe for years, and he has written and spoken extensively about it. In this brief review, I'll just point out that the assembled and "written through" fragments that form the middle stanzas of this book all seem to allude to it. Problems and details of representation in media from mathematical notation to drawing—

including light, presence, being, and time—flicker tantalizingly throughout, reflecting upon the poems' own making.[6] In their elliptical, gnomic, sometimes *kōan*-like form these stanzas collectively suggest a kind of *sortes virgilianae* of poetic prompts. To consult that traditional oracle is much easier with a codex, as was often done in the Renaissance, than a scroll. In what other ways is experiencing the BlazeVOX edition of *sound of wave in channel* different from using the online PDF at [Editions Eclipse](#) or Ratcliffe's daily blog [Temporality?](#)

The ground of Ratcliffe's work is time, as he realized years ago—witness titles like *Temporality* and *continuum*. The ability to experience duration constitutes an important variable in both his marathon performances and in the private act of silent reading. In the language of sampling theory, the book is a low-resolution record—one set of observations (data points) per day. The cinematic term would be *time-lapse*, after the technique normally used to reveal a process, such as a flower's opening or a building's construction, from inception to completion. But nothing “happens” in this book except the endless flux of weather and seasons.

One can read a poem a day, experiencing the text at the writer's pace. My experience of this is not much different whether reading online or in the physical volumes. One can read several poems at a sitting, compressing weeks or months into half an hour. Here the experiences diverge. Seeing poems on facing pages emphasizes the morphing of one imperfect likeness into another—the images superpose in a way that scrolling inhibits, and that requires downloading and manipulating the PDF file (and sufficiently large screen resolution) to achieve electronically. As I progress through a volume, I can instantly flip back to compare a line or passage with one long past, and feel the distance traveled between my fingers. The accumulation of pages mirrors the growing pile of finished poems on Ratcliffe's table and gives a physical dimension to duration. And of course, reading the poems on the blog usually means moving backward in time from the most recent posting.

But perhaps most salient in the experience of the physical volumes is their congruence, as objects, with the matter of the poems. Ratcliffe was already writing the daily observational poems that would become *CLOUD / RIDGE* in 2001. Facebook opened to the adult public in 2006 and the iPhone debuted in 2007, quickly altering assumptions about the relation of attention

to time. There are no glowing screens in the text of *sound of wave in channel*; every object is defined by reflected light and shadow, as is a codex. Unlike hyperactively demanding networked devices, the physical books move at whatever pace you choose. They support contemplative engagement. In them, BlazeVOX has given us a fitting capsule in which to preserve a thousand pages of imperfect likeness—Ratcliffe’s long now.

Notes:

[1] Stephen Ratcliffe, *Campion: On Song*, (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), viii.

[2] The 2011 *Jacket2* feature “[Listening to Stephen Ratcliffe](#)” explores his practice through a number of essays on and extensive interviews with the poet.

[3] In the earlier works, the corresponding lines would reflect the water-level view from Ratcliffe’s surfboard in the channel, looking back towards shore.

[4] Actually, five poems include urban material. The first (from 3.25) opens with “light coming into sky above still black / building” while its concluding stanza remains the view from the Overlook. The last poem of the group displays the converse transition, opening with the Bolinas ridge but concluding with “grey white sky above shadowed building / bird standing on branch across from it”. These odd splices emphasize the way verbal constructs compose an apparent reality independent from the phenomenal world they sometimes appear to describe, something that engages Ratcliffe in this book.

[5] See Norman Fischer’s essay “[On ‘Portraits and Repetition’](#)”

[6] Ratcliffe’s comments on his previous book, *Temporality*, in his [interview with Linda Russo](#), remain pertinent to *sound of wave in channel*: “I find myself over a period of time moving back and forth between writing that comes entirely out of perception of things happening around me,

and writing that comes out of language. So, a work like *Temporality* really splices those two things together. I really agree with you that, despite everything I've said about perceptions of things in the world, which, I think, are true for the opening and closing sections of this poem, it goes toward exploring how these words are being put together. And the middle lines in these two little couplets in *Temporality* are trying, in some way, in mining these words from texts, to comment upon or almost be like essays or critical writing about the poem itself, and about the processes of what I'm trying to do.”