

Fissured Visions

R.F. Langley, *More or Less*. The Many Press, £3.50 (Available from The Many Press, 15 Norcott Road, London, N16 7BJ)

The world is made of particles in
fields of force. Of course. Tell it to Jack.

—R.F. LANGLEY, “Tom Thumb”

In 1919 the atom was split, and couldn’t be put back together again. In the same year—as CK Stead has pointed out—the strangeness of living in a world which could literally fall to pieces found poetic expression in T.S. Eliot’s “Gerontion”:

...De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms.

Eliot’s artfully particular names flash past without explanation. It is a strategy of deliberate disorientation, a breaking of poetry’s long-standing agreement with the reader to refer to mutually available meaning. Instead the emotional crisis of bewilderment is transferred.

Similarly mysterious characters slip in and out of R.F. Langley’s fissiparous poetry: Kate, Harry, Jenny, Jack, “deaf John”. They appear to be the names of familiars. The “difficulty” Langley’s poems present to the reader is more intimate than Eliot’s; on some occasions we are so microscopically involved in the individual parts of the poem that the whole cannot be fully apprehended. “Nothing is less than/particular.” But these are not therefore poems which leave the reader with nothing particularly meaningful, as some reviews of Langley’s recent *Collected* (Carcanet, 2000) seemed to conclude.

Langley’s poems are typically written from the ruminative point of view. His first major poem, “Matthew Glover”, relocated

Charles Olson's "projective verse" to the open fields of Suffolk. It portrayed a local man confused, in 1800, as to how to vote on the issue of common land enclosure. He ends considering a bush "where small birds flip/ almost silently", finding in the distraction "no hint// or half a hint// not enough to decide." Uncertainty threatens to become paralysis in these poems. Relief is found in wonder at the intricacy of the world, how one thing leads always to another. The exploration of indeterminacy then becomes a potentially fruitful mode of mental activity. "I love things when they're incredibly precise," Langley has said, in his one published interview, "and yet move off all over the place as well." In the same interview he spoke of having stood for an "hour and half" on a country track: "it just occurred to me that I ought to stand without moving at all for that length of time and see what happened... A feeling that you might get through to what was really there if you stripped off enough."

This is the feeling that drives Langley's poems on. It is interestingly enacted by the distinctive formal tensions of his more recent work. Strictly syllabic lines are imposed upon a voice which alternates unpredictably between short and long sentences, all the time chasing bold, embedded rhyme schemes. Fixity is forever on the cusp of flux. The result is verse which jinks down the page, requiring the reader to halt, consider, re-read—stand still, that is, and see what is really there. Every word is a detail, an atom, perceived, and added with close attention to both echo and etymology.

T.E. Hulme defined a writer as someone "who dwells on a point for the edification of the reader, and for his pleasure, thus prolonging the pleasure and luxury of thought in the mind of the reader". Langley's precision-packed, carefully-paced poetry is an unusually pure example of this process. The following will attempt to trace the intensely pleasurable impression made on this reader by *More or Less*, a new pamphlet, and thereby sketch an encouraging map. Langley's notable restraint as a published writer—there were 17 poems in his *Collected*, and 7 here—allows for the rare luxury of considering each poem individually.

I. "Cook Ting": "Take hold of a word/ and turn it on. Tourbillion." Tourbillion: a whirlwind, a vortex, a spinning firework. The poem turns about and about dazzlingly, but what is it about? It is about everything it contains; how it contains it, and that it contains it. It takes hold of a world, and turns it on. An old

shirt, a leaf, gulls, white sprats, a cliff, twelve blank sheets of paper hung up on a string, “a pair of socks in a poem”. Whipped on by Langley’s runaway rhythms and zig-zag rhymes, the connecting text shuttles breathlessly through its inventory, in “the joy/ of perpetual bicker”. Cook Ting is the master meat-carver in the *Chuang Tzu*, who teaches the secret of caring for life through the finesse of his butchery. He works with the meat as it is—tracing, eyes shut, its unique contours, never dulling his knife through conflict with the binding fibres:

A

blade is so sharp it can dance round
the joint. Silvery energies
argue the point. The carcass of
an ox flops open.

Implicitly, the artist cuts up experience with Cook Ting’s knife, staying true to its quiddity. The nouns in this poem are like the “pasted papers” in Georges Braque’s cubist compositions; they lend the picture (Braque explained) the “certitude” of “simple facts”. There is no such thing as abstract art. Art is always casting the abstracting mind “bright bait”, choice cuts, from the life of momentary sensation:

You notice what has
gone into the picture. Bite it.
It can’t be expected to wait.

2. “Sixpence a Day”: a walk on the beach, beach-combing, watching gulls, discovering an unusual spider in the dunes. “There seems”

to be no limit to
the amount of life it
would be good to have...

The sun sets, however, and awareness of the ageing body edges in: “this heartbeat”, the “shivering in/ the muscle of your cheek”. The youthful spirits of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* flicker through the poem, poignantly: “Electric/ peaseblossom flutters in/ the surf on autumn nights.” At the end, at home, the mind sorts through its pebbles: “Maroon. Brown.// Ivory black.” It then

shirt, a leaf, gulls, white sprats, a cliff, twelve blank sheets of paper hung up on a string, “a pair of socks in a poem”. Whipped on by Langley’s runaway rhythms and zig-zag rhymes, the connecting text shuttles breathlessly through its inventory, in “the joy/ of perpetual bicker”. Cook Ting is the master meat-carver in the *Chuang Tzu*, who teaches the secret of caring for life through the finesse of his butchery. He works with the meat as it is—tracing, eyes shut, its unique contours, never dulling his knife through conflict with the binding fibres:

A

blade is so sharp it can dance round
the joint. Silvery energies
argue the point. The carcass of
an ox flops open.

Implicitly, the artist cuts up experience with Cook Ting’s knife, staying true to its quiddity. The nouns in this poem are like the “pasted papers” in Georges Braque’s cubist compositions; they lend the picture (Braque explained) the “certitude” of “simple facts”. There is no such thing as abstract art. Art is always casting the abstracting mind “bright bait”, choice cuts, from the life of momentary sensation:

You notice what has
gone into the picture. Bite it.
It can’t be expected to wait.

2. “Sixpence a Day”: a walk on the beach, beach-combing, watching gulls, discovering an unusual spider in the dunes. “There seems”

to be no limit to
the amount of life it
would be good to have...

The sun sets, however, and awareness of the ageing body edges in: “this heartbeat”, the “shivering in/ the muscle of your cheek”. The youthful spirits of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* flicker through the poem, poignantly: “Electric/ peaseblossom flutters in/ the surf on autumn nights.” At the end, at home, the mind sorts through its pebbles: “Maroon. Brown.// Ivory black.” It then

attempts to revive the childhood freshness of the day: the sea “cool as lemonade”. The pension or pocket money of the title isn’t much—but it seems a workable “amount of life”.

3. “Still Life with Wineglass”: “I am anxious about the/ wine-glass. It’s an expert at/ staying awake”. How still—or lifeless—is anything when thought about? But then how still—or lifeless—do we desire things to be? Asking these questions about a glass of water set on a window-sill, the mind finds its image in a chaffinch flitting among wind-blown pappus; watching its “findings.../ fluff out and cream/ off”. The richest, most kaleidoscopic poem in the pamphlet, with lovely strokes of pure verbal colour—“blue to/ orange”, “milk and/ magenta”, “rosy Mercury”—and pure verbal play: “the wineglass put its foot down,/ chip-chop.” (Like Shakespeare and small children, Langley is fond of what linguists call “reduplicative compounds”, with their see-sawing vowels: “pit pat”, “dib dab”.) The end blends colour and pun in the image of “a cautious chaffinch” which “knows it is pink”. This is not whimsical surrealism; Langley, a careful naturalist, is playing on the chaffinch’s “pink-pink” song. The bird knows it is not black, too. Nevertheless, readers of Wallace Stevens’s famous poem about how the mind fastens and projects onto dumb reality to survive should recognise it.

4. “No Great Shakes”: like “Wineglass”, an exploration of relations between the mind inside and the outside world, but at a darker hour of the day. Langley’s syllabic lines—here, 7/ 7/ 7/ 4—are calculated to cut against the iambic grain. The tight quatrains read as if spoken through gritted teeth:

Outside, each bit of twirling
pollen has the best shape for
the flow through the vanes of the
cones. Inside—none.

Sterility, immobility, fear; holding the old dice without hope, the “four worn jacks... in the shaking// hand.” No “great shakes”—no quadruple sixes—are expected now. The lyric situation is reminiscent of Hopkins’s sonnet, “Thou art indeed just, Lord” (“birds build—but not I build”), only stripped of the possibility of prayer. To the last couplet the poem grimly refuses to relieve its circular despair: “The clown’s own/ knuckles are the bones he’s thrown.”

5. “Experiment with a Hand Lens”: the title suggests some deducible objective situation, but “The clown under/ cover” is hard to see whole. An insect (“a/ set of tucked legs”) in the cup of a flower? Perhaps, but there are also several phrases strangely reminiscent of Sylvia Plath’s pregnancy-riddle, “You’re”:

This is her son. Her
pearl in the pout. The
merry meal in her

floury mouth.

Hopkinsian neologisms—“Heart prick. Fire/ crumb.”—suggest a pulse. The poem tells a little story about growth—or, magnification—with evasive, Klee-like playfulness. A voice takes a rhyme for a walk across short, unrhymed triplets, the germ of a thought running away from it. “Not so far!/ Not so fast!”.

6. “Cakes and Ale”: a dream-poem inspired, it seems, by *Star Wars*: “the sequence in the bar/ on an outer planet”. A rare and fine example of sci-fi verse: “bizarre combs frizz up// against the strip light.” Like much futuristic writing, it is partly a distorted version of the past—in this case the Late Middle Ages. Sketching the costumes of the alien clientele, Langley displays his collector’s ear for the lexical details of early modern English: “red plush tip-pets”, “a souveraigne collar”, “Fanged/ pauldrons”. “You” are the hero, Childe Roland or Luke Skywalker. You arrive in a “tempest”, seeking the grotesque mother-figure of a monstrous barmaid who dispenses from handles in “her rosy,/ pumping heart.”

...you hold out your
father’s empty bag. This bit.
Again. The hockett stops. The
strobes lock rigid at the top
of nightmare. Then a dragon
starts to swivel in his chair.
The barmaid’s million hands
close on this one pump handle
and become a simple pair.

As so often in Langley’s poems, resolution comes as the many—the whirling mental molecules—combine into the “simple” one. Almost.

7. "After the Funeral": the title recalls Dylan Thomas, but the tone doesn't. The calmest of these poems, the most formally tentative, it resists Thomas's plummy rhetoric of resurrection, and stays instead with the dead afterwards of bereavement:

In the Ceramic Gallery. No train
till half past five. Yellow.

The poem waits diffidently for the train of its own thought, gently gathering images around a memory: bowls in the gallery ("moon after moon") and yellow leaves (decorating the bowls but also outside, "in Gordon Square"). Langley's preoccupation is with how we really think, how we wrap the abstract in available imagery: "Think it/ as leaves. Think it as bowls." "It" being the blank fact of "Pauline's death". Time (an October afternoon) and place (London) are more certain in this poem than in the others, and, for once, we are told something biographical about a named figure—an admired, reticent woman—who is now fragments:

Her passport photograph looks like the moon
in a tight woollen hat. She had given

her money away. Her
stare will say nothing of
that.

Trying to settle around the thought of this death, the poem ends on a verbal felicity which merges the shape of the bowls with their potential chime. The verb "rings" quietens towards a noun, leaving an unfanciful image of eternity—moon after moon—echoing in the mind:

...I forget what is
left of the leaves. But it's
a knuckle keeps rapping
the bowl, so that it rings.
So that it rings and rings.