

<Carl Rakosi>²

In “Reflections on my Medium” in *The Old Poet’s Tale* (1999), Carl Rakosi writes that “form kept sending a message that it had something of its own to express”. He goes on: “A box shape, for example, gave a boxed-in feeling to a poem, and a poem shaped like a vertical rectangle looked severe”. His emphasis here is on visual display, patterns on the page. However, this is not the extent of Rakosi’s interest in form as he addresses the form of the poem as object and effect—the box and the vertical rectangle are shapes directly related to feelings, presumably to buttress or counter the content of the poem. The poem is not primarily an object to be seen, but “a message” to be expressed, in part by the form. This reflects some of Emerson’s concerns in “The Poet” as he sets thought before form in the order of genesis, but brings thought and form together in the order of time—the freedom to order words to thought in original ways is emphasised as is the necessity to bring form to bear on the meaning of the poem for both Emerson and Rakosi. Formal considerations are part of, not apart from, the creative process. In other words, Rakosi’s presumed desire to emphasise claustrophobic sensations in one of his examples above requires a unique form to reflect the content of that poem.

Rakosi also links form to music. In addressing his growing awareness of the value of spaces between lines, he writes, “I extended the space between lines, enough to make the reader wonder why”. And he presses on again: “the space between words and lines was not a null, as I had always assumed... when I liberated it from its mold, it became expressive, a part of the poem’s score”. In effect, space creates shapes and determines pace. Overall in this consideration of his work, Rakosi stresses an heuristic approach to form and a sharply defined sense of detail in bringing whatever is found, engaged and expressed into clear focus in terms of content, rhythm, and visual design.

"Everyman" is the first poem in *The Old Poet's Tale* (I read "Song" as an epigraph). I take "Everyman" at face value: "*copulate*/*< copulare*:" is the opening couplet and indicates interest in a word by pointing to its root in Latin (translated in the *OED* as "fasten together"). Clearly a twentieth-century morality poem, "Everyman" seeks to define the activity of copulation—copulate drawn for the Latin stem *copulare*—a word or naming which has been around thousands of years. I think that Rakosi likes the idea of things being around a long time. I think that his interest in life around him is complemented by a sense of time as open space. His is not a simple chronology, a developmental model. His experiences today are comfortably embedded in the past. This porosity is evident in his account of his life's work: "the presumption underlying chronological sequence is that a literary development and some kind of psychological progression or evolving take place in this way". His view is both intriguing and important as we seek to assess his work and sets a context which is challenging for scholars. Recently James Fenton suggested that Marianne Moore's work could benefit from a new edition to address this very problem: "[an edition] which would bring back rejected poems, show the history of her revisions, and above all make chronological sense". Rakosi is quite happy not to assist in such developmental models for a poet's work. His sense of space and time resists chronological charts and so asks critics to adjust their expectations and methods.

What we lose in the time-line, we gain in his interest in essences. Much of his language is plain, easily understood, and direct, and this allows him to shock us into "whys" every now and again, to "wonder why". A good example is his use of the word "quiddity". It looks and sounds odd and attractive in the context of a general commitment to plain diction. "Quiddity" is present in three poems and each is close to each in *Meditations* (1985). In "The Glimmer" it is used three times and is associated with the "eye" (and i) and the poem ends, "Ah, quiddity!" In "Meditation IX" it is associated with bone. In "Ballad of the Diminished I" it is used twice, once with a sparrow noted as its "own quiddity" and once in the line, "And how close can we get to quiddity?" The response in the poem indicates that metaphor is the answer. The *OED* defines "quiddity" as "the inherent nature or essence of a person or thing" or "nicety in argument; a quibble". It seems to me that this becomes a signal of sorts, a repeated sign to link sec-

tions of *Meditations* and to be a signpost for the reader. Quiddity is vision (eye), language (i), self (I), language personified “Ah, quiddity!”, nature (sparrow), and, as metaphor, is a critical and aesthetic issue for the poet. The spaces between the repeated word (across lines and poems) create an aggregation of sorts—the massing of detail on quiddity makes it a complex and difficult term to define. It becomes a many-headed object of desire. The response to it finally is as clear as it is complex: metaphor (“Ballad of the Diminished I”). In an interview with Burton Hatlen in *Sagetrieb*, Rakosi said that metaphor is the bridge if he is “deeply involved in a poem”—present only if essential.

In the poem, “AUG. 7, 1972” a writer seeks to type “Aug. 7, 1972” but does so with the capital lock in place: “AUG. &,(!&&@”. The voice of the poem admires the result in considering it “grounded/ on the unconditional” and so “one of the attributes of beauty”. This could not happen to a hand-written poem, or at least not without intention. Typing is foregrounded here. The accidental discovery of shapes on the page causes the writer to consider its effects. “Unconditional”: freely given, without setting any conditions: happenstance reveals quiddity?

This sends me back to “Everyman”: “*copulate*/ < *copulare*.”—one word hugging the left-hand margin and the other firm against the right. This becomes the pattern for the ten lines of the poem. Each line is clearly delineated in its own right, yet coupled with that which went before and that which follows after. But what of the angle bracket? Certainly it signals the introduction of the Latin word and is simply a bracket to introduce a different discourse—the stem of the English word is presented. But why the single angle bracket? The symbol < means “less than” in mathematics. It might also suggest a way in, a way out, a signpost to penetrate and receive—a medium strangely represented, and poised between italicised signs requiring explanation. It is an inverted v, indicating via and versus and more and more. One thinks of Thomas Pynchon’s use of the letter V in his novel of the same name. It is effectively a sign to “make the reader wonder why”. It stops the words being interchangeable as it implies intersection. Yes, one defines the other if we read “<” as a bracket which subordinates archaic Latin to living English or that English is less than Latin if we reread the sign in terms of the mathematical sign. Indeed we might ask, is the angle bracket pointing to the significance of spacing?

No matter what, we surely return to “<” to wonder why. I think of William Carlos Williams as he begins *Paterson*: “an/ interpenetration, both ways” or Wallace Stevens’s “The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man”: “Could you have said the bluejay suddenly/ Would swoop to earth?” The improbability, shock, and inevitability of the connections as much as a refusal to allow for easy chronology or development is evident as one term is set to resist and, paradoxically, embrace the other, and in between there is that white space. Then two lines, “to join”, “to couple”—a couplet of couplings—close the meaning. Emphatically an evocative set of images represents various forms of uniting to complete the first section, with the angle bracket nicely settled into the consensus of intercourse as it teases the reader with thoughts of misalignment.

Rakosi tends to those blank spaces as one would to any object of interest: “the space between words and lines was not a null” and these gaps are “not unlike the silences in a Beethoven quartet”. In “Everyman” the eye/ear moves through the rich and evocative world of couplets and copulation and a good deal of white space to an expression of emptiness—white space into words: “Says nothing”. Who or what “[s]ays nothing”? The voice of the poem? The poem? The act of copulation? Dictionary definition—clarity of meaning as it ignores, evades, avoids aspects of that to be defined? In the mind lies “lust”, part of, linked to “to join”, “to couple”. “[N]othing” creates a context, a place in which the blankness is emphasised before the dramatic arrival of “lust”—the quiddity of the poem. It is clear that much of what we have encountered is a preface for the introduction of lust. The images associated with “Says nothing” points not alone to silence and emptiness, but to a failure to address that which is never/often/seldom associated with copulation—lust. This new layer of meaning is now itself defined, not in words directly associated with it (the dictionary and thesaurus are sidelined), but in figurative language. Lust is:

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| 1. the iron master | image = let’s say, blacksmith |
| 2. sweaty | image = effect of activity of blacksmith |
| 3. breathless | image = effect of activity of blacksmith |
| 4. fierce | image = attitude |

Lust is a fierce, sweaty, breathless iron master—the definition per-

sonified produces new angles. But what is gained here in the imagery? Who or what is an iron master? Could we say blacksmith, swordsman/woman, foundry, Satan, evil, promiscuity?

The image of iron is used a few times in this collection: in "How Goes It with Time?" Rakosi writes of the "ongenbite of iron". Echoes of Joyce's "agenbite of inwit" in *Ulysses*? Here though, Joyce's cerebral occasion is reflected by Rakosi's materiality and sensuality. This is again emphasised in "Meditation XII" where the rationalist (dictionary definitions?) is set aside for a figure represented by Prospero and a spider who, "although fanciful", love "salt and iron". Iron seems to be a grounding of the imagination, a means of authentication. This takes us back to quiddity. The desire in the poems again and again is to engage experience with a fullness which allows for the intersections of difference ("fanciful"/"iron"), and to express such excursions in a way which treats form and content as elemental and equal in the process.

"Everyman" signals Rakosi's interest in binaries—in a poem about couplings we see couples in couplets. However, the neatness of simple pairings is undermined by the stress on that which lies between, the blankness is represented by the white spaces as it is expressed in a word, "nothing", which, in turn, points to the presence of unspoken "lust". There is a warrior quality to this. It is not gender neutral as the imagery of the poem seems committed to the concerns of "man" in "Everyman", in "iron master" and in the war-like image of "fierce". And it is "fierce", pressed hard against the right-hand margin, that brings the poem to a close. The to-ing and fro-ing from left to right ends on the tenth line with an image which defines an attitude of competition: "Of formidably violent and intractable temper, like a wild beast; vehement and merciless in anger or hostility" (*OED*).

With "fierce" in mind, it is shocking to turn the page and find a poem entitled "The Husband". Here again Rakosi sets the opening lines in couplets as the voice of poem observes his pregnant partner. As the sustained form of couplets contained levels of tension in "Everyman" (layers of definition), here they cannot be sustained as the direct engagement of one to the other, "So he took her hand", reveals a tenderness—copulation may be lust and fierceness, but it is also love and tenderness. This I think begins a remarkable and sustained expression of the elemental duality in Rakosi's work between the "hard master/of an image" or poetry's

abstraction, and the “plain life”, her “smile” (“Leah”).

I see in this most often the influence of Marianne Moore’s work and that of William Carlos Williams. By this I mean Rakosi’s sensitivity to the importance of the line as a unit of grammar, his fascination with design, his determination to cleanse the object or objects of the poem (to define each in the clearest terms), his comfort and discomfort with figurative language, and his willingness to engage ordinary life on its own terms. Surely Moore is evident in the ways in which Rakosi approaches his subjects: “This is the raw data./ A mystery translates it” he writes in “Shore Line”, and he is relatively explicit (and playful) about his interest in Williams’s work: “So much/ depends” (“Yes”). Most significantly and beyond such influences, Rakosi is a poet taking us into the twenty-first century. In recent years, some critics have sought to create categories of poetry such as New Formalism and Language writing: poets from the first group are interested in “canonical” forms as opposed to the second whose focus is on “language” as an object in its own right. Can Rakosi’s work be registered in this way? I cannot imagine how it could be easily or effectively achieved. Rakosi’s work constitutes an expression of a mind, or the imagination, straddling interests (lustful copulation), with a dynamic sense of space, time and language, alert to wonder, seeking quiddity, and sometimes using an object like an angle bracket to point the way.