

Changing All that is Metal in Thy House to Gold: The Political as Personal

I'm returning to Russell Square, except I was never there. At least not on the day I wrote my poem 'Axis Is', on the 7th July 2005. I wrote it five hours after the three bombs were detonated on the underground, skimming the surface swamp of confused media which I'd followed closely since being refused access to London's rail network that morning.

The poem's final line was its ignition, a response to a squib of cold resistance in a Teletext news headline, published in Pac-Man-sized pixels in the fizzle-out of adrenaline. It's at moments like this that you see the media as it really is, reality beyond its comprehension, railing with cryptic resilience like Poor Tom on the heath. This was the kind of pseudo-intellectual reporting which was the opposite, and sister to, *The Sun's* later account that a man had been seen to 'explode' on the bus at Tavistock Square. At both ends of the spectrum reportage dehumanises, turns the individual to a stock market point or a half-processed Pokémon.

In that moment of writing the poem, at around 3.30pm, I'd just found out that my wife, Sarah, who was working at Canary Wharf that day, was safe. I realised then that the urgent facts of information – who and how many had died, where relatives should go to find out details of what was happening etc – were already being replaced with interpretative commentary. With banking at the top end of concerns. 'Blasts won't effect UK economy' the headline ran, with a slight typo that I retained in my poem.

At that moment of the headline being published on television screens across the UK the numbers of known dead was still in the forties, with the final number of fifty-two yet to be known. The actuaries were exploring the economic repercussions of the explosions before the bodies had not only cooled but been counted. 'James is okay', I'd heard a mother speak into her phone earlier that day, 'but he can't get home.'

I'm returning to Russell Square even though the Piccadilly Line train – the third to be blown up that day – never made it there. The explosion went off about a minute after it left King's Cross (it takes one minute and fifty-four seconds for the tube to travel between those stations, I've timed it). The Piccadilly Line is a deep-level tube, the effect of its depth being to compact the repercussions of the detonated bomb. The most visible, and obvious place to commemorate those who died that day would be a few minutes walk away at Tavistock Square, where the bus explosion took place an hour after the tube attacks, killing sixteen of the fifty-two people.

I walk past the first site of the Faber and Faber offices, its residence before the business moved to Queen Square and then to its current location at Great Russell Street. When Faber offered to publish the work of the Beat-inspired, deeply troubled poet Harry Fainlight, Fainlight's response was to light the manuscript and push it through the publisher's post box. Xerox in a jumpsuit of flame and shadow. An inversion of the known conundrum of the rejected poet. Fainlight was made the offer, sucked up the detail and spat it out like an owl pellet. The tiny skull of poetic possibility squirming in the torn rags. *He* rejected the publisher: not many can say that.

'Axis Is' is one of maybe ten poems I've written that I can perform from memory. A reclamation of personal language against Bush and Blair's morality drama. The title of the poem was drawn from Bush's axiom that he was waging war on the 'axis of evil'. I'd mined this material at length for my first collection, *The Hutton Inquiry*. There had been a weird tension building since the decision to go to war on Iraq was made, arguments combining the registers of post-atomic conflict, *The Wizard of Oz* and the English medieval epic. This was Blair's version in any case: we fall asleep in a field one day and wake up transformed, finding danger closing in. Beowulf. Plowman. Pearl. 'A monster without a face' I described it in the poem. This monster could be anything, whatever was needed to confirm Blair in his role of knight errant. 'Axis Is' was one of the few poems in my second collection *Zeppelins* to be written completely in lower case: a riposte to those buccaneering news headlines.

Three years later Russell Square became a retreat from a personal crisis. My son, Pavel, was born with one functioning kidney and his health returned us repeatedly for surgery at Great Ormond Street. Sleepless nights laid out flat on a pullout bed in a Victorian ward. Nurses hovering like orbs on the fringe of consciousness, dosing out liquids and scratching numbers onto charts. Uncertainty and claustrophobia. One morning before Pavel's surgery, I recognised the surgeon who was going to operate on him later that day. Relaxed, he walked through the doors of the hospital in casual clothes, coffee in hand. It was like we were condensing our whole world for handover, giving it to this man we didn't know. It was a rare moment of possibility: maybe after this I could be of *use*, retrain as a doctor, help people. Then four hours later I'm cutting and refining the experience into the cubist logic of a poem. The only positive use I've ever been able to make of experiences I'd rather forget.

Throughout those years of visiting the hospital, Russell Square was the *other*, separated by Southampton Row from the Victorian ghosts of the hospital which was embedded like a cheese in the sniffy rind of Bloomsbury. Southampton Row served a similar function to the Thames: a crossing place that symbolised pilgrimage and arrival. On an hour's release from the hospital I'd stride through the British Museum with Pavel on my shoulders, slipping

into a single stream of time with Aztecs and Incas. A sanity-saving tactic which allowed us to see ourselves at distance, atoms in time, passing through on our way to a happier place. The poems written during the years of living in and out of Great Ormond Street went into my third collection *THE RESTRUCTURE*. Mental illness was an outcrop of the experience. As was the financial recession. But set against both was the energy and linguistic inventiveness of my growing son.

‘Axis Is’ is a poem of the fringes. It could only have been written in Dagenham, in personal crisis, using the automated neurosis of quick media as its source. It’s easy for me to feel the rhythm of this poem in the pacing I did that day, up and down the tiny sunlit hall, waiting for the networks to clear so I could be sure that Sarah was okay. That tiny terrace, locked like a living cell in the network of cells that make Dagenham’s empire of terraces was where we lived, all in all, for nearly a decade. The house we first brought Pavel home to, laying down the car seat he was in (though we didn’t drive) like a basket of fruit. I had no trouble writing poems there. Dagenham was a project in modern living which had been mostly farmland until as late as the 1930s. It had the right kind of balance between human life and industrial and natural landscape to provide the material for the kind of projective, place-responsive poems I was set on writing. The pubs were without pretension, and cheap. You could sit all afternoon and listen. Iain Sinclair wrote to me years later saying that the poems I’d put together for *Zeppelins* confirmed what he’d predicted years before, that the poets of the future would come from Dagenham. A long way from afternoons dappled by the oaks of Russell Square, languorous agenda papers stippled with biscuit crumbs and reams of submitted poems to consider, verses aligned like suburban tennis courts and enough tea to keep you seated until the bladder spasms.

2.

When I was putting *THE RESTRUCTURE* together it started to make sense to think of my first three collections as a trilogy. What begins in *The Hutton Inquiry* with poems about the war in Iraq moves forward in *Zeppelins* to include poems about the inevitable backlash to the war, the July Bombings and the tortures of Abu Ghraib. *THE RESTRUCTURE* addresses the financial collapse that turned Blair’s summer of love into a winter of depleted serotonin. Not unrelatedly, I hit a crisis of depression, which the poems also document. The political is always personal in my poetry, it’s the only way I’ve found to make global politics bear my fingerprint. The experiences in the hospital in Bloomsbury and listening to people on public transport created the textures for ‘THE RESTRUCTURE’ sequence itself:

it's important to listen for once :

THE RESTRUCTURE wants to think its world in you

A large number of the poems I've found myself able to produce couldn't have been written without the weight of external politics pressing down on me, but the poems resist global messaging through being written from the perspective of the personal moment, through a personal style. There are other places to go for chants, soundbites and collective leftist ripostes. I think of these poems as if structured through a double helix with one spine documenting political events, twisting across another spine of simple captured experience. Poems that turn background white noise into foreground, then return it to background. At that point in my writing life how could I know whether what was happening in the world, or happening to me in Bloomsbury, was the cause of my serotonin drop? It was the texture of what was happening and my poems found lyric in it all, without distinction.

3.

Writing *Speculatrix* introduced a new strand to my poetics. Where the earlier poems had listened-in to the distortion of media and conversations broken by tannoy announcements on the tube, I now found a new source of minable language in Jacobean drama. I hadn't considered at such length before how contemporary poetic language can be sharpened through proximity to early modern English and the poetic work of long dead poets. These poets had informed my work but I hadn't had the awareness, or perhaps confidence, to bed-trick them. The affect was like the luminance contrast on a visual display, whereby the image is sharpened through increasing the difference between values: the bilious black palette of Jacobean registers sharpened contemporary language. The displaced and virtual realm of early modern pleasure-seeking was forced to meet the quick displacement of the web. Globe culture flattened to a handheld screen. Meet me on the bank of the Thames, meet me there and be ready. No: just Tweet me.

Writing these poems involved carrying a copy of an original play around the city in readiness for the moments of lyric flight that travelling through London has always excited in me. The early modern text was disposable beyond the completion of my poem. At the moment of writing, the language of the play would reveal itself as if through a synced-in channel and became an adaptable parable to the hysterical drive of human life in the current capital. When London elicited its sonatas in me – as it always does – the text of the play was there, like a slab of white flesh ready to be transplanted into the poem taking shape on my phone. Somehow the right phrase or word was always there in the text of the play, waiting to be found, which I then italicised in my poem for ease of reference and also for effect. Italics are quicker on the eye, have

the jaggedness of a rapier cut. Working in this way removed the narrative completely from the original play, which was fine, as that wasn't what I was interested in: I was seeking the taut music of the lyric.

Part of my poetic consciousness is embedded in the reality of the poetic self as *other* to functioning society. The poet as the last custodian of language, on the fringes of capital landfill, and somehow free of it. Watching with a hysterical nerve in the jowl. The poet as the only sane one in the theatre of poseurs, sidelined to the wings. But I'm part of that slovenly mass too, the unhealthy pace of London, a slippery aspirant in next year's Burberry, ferrying labour like cattle, prompted by a Google alert. And there was also, perhaps, something in the poems I was writing that took a barbaric approach to the thing I care about most in my writing: literature itself. After all, to make the poems work I had to disembody Jacobean drama with a scalpel. This was very strange to experience: the disgust I held for capital greed became embedded into the speed and tone of my own practice as a poet. I was the one – the poet – getting what was needed, ruthlessly, through any means possible, cutting apart Webster and Jonson. Mind the fucking gap.

Each of the poems in the *Speculatrix* sequence was written from the perspective of a character from one of the plays; Vindice; Duke of Brachiano; Alsemero; Alworth; Lovewit; Jasper; the Duchess of Malfi; Leantio and Duke Altfront. But these are no dramatic monologues in the sense of seeking character distinction, each of the speakers are reduced by bigger factors, reduced to bits by a superstructure that bewilders them – which prevents them from reaching their most intimate desires. The political as personal. All human yearning for touch, texture, ingestion, is stalled by invisible skies: capital, class, gender. I had this vision of the characters I spoke in – the real character of the actor, that is – suddenly being thrown from the stage and onto the streets of London. I enacted this by setting each of the poems in the location of its first performance. There is a doubling of the metaworld here: the invented play is taken over by the real people who acted in them, now turfed out of time and place, and into the gutters of London. They still try to speak as their character, wearing the character's clothes, but also curse the playwright who has allowed for this situation to unfold ('John Marston how could you do this to us?'). The prosperous must experience London as the poor do: as voyeurs of consumption, rags in a wind of digits, the most eloquent voices of the city, beyond the encoding of any device.

These poems forced me to address the issue of form head-on. I've always made up my own forms, led by the ear and the internal structural possibilities of a poem. I can often see the poem's form before I write it, like a shadow behind the eye, before the text is laid. The crosswise placement of cadences

which will knit it together. As much as I love the free, open lines of Apollinaire, the mulch of my poetic accent is always with the Anglo Saxon. In the *Speculatrix* poems I was drawn towards creating a tension between the music of the lines and their physical shape on the page. I found the solution in contrast; through the technique of using rising and falling accents over words to emphasis the music within the lines, and presenting the poems in what might appear to be chunks of prose but are actually prose sonnets. I used a dividing line at the end of any poem that ended on a fifteenth line to separate it from the sonnet structure. This form allowed me to bring the many disparate strands of the poem into cohesion, to give some order to the wandering players out on the streets of London and the floating shreds of language registers. What appears to be blocks of data is linked through music to the tightness of the early modern sonnet. Form can synthesise chaos.

This felt like a new approach in my work, distinct from the trilogy of the first three books. A different approach in form, tone and subject. A new way to pay old debts. But it wasn't completely new, not quite, and I've come to see the poems differently since their publication. Feedback from reviewers and readers has forced me to reassess what I thought I was doing in these poems, and where they sit within the context of my earlier work. There is the theme of money, for example, the lance of capital, which has been there since *The Hutton Inquiry*, the first word of which is the subtitle: 'PAYDAY'. 'This night I'll change all that is metal in thy house to gold' Jonson writes in *The Alchemist*. My poetry has always been written from the sidelines of the aspiring classes in that sense, an attempt to foist my DNA, and experience, into the ink of the page.

4.

Jack Straw was easy to miss back at the time of the decision to go to war on Iraq. A stretched and sedated Moomin, talking to camera as if the world had been muted. Sixteen years later I discovered by chance that he'd actually named himself after Peasant's Revolt insurgent Jack Rakestraw, or Rackstraw as he was known. The force of the youthful leftist had whispered into cold water like air from a lilo. Robin Cook, House of Commons leader and one of the highest profile figures in the Labour party at the time, resigned over the incident. Cook died a year later, his family deciding on his own words for his epitaph: *I may not have succeeded in halting the war, but I did secure the right of parliament to decide on war*. The kind of un-ironed openness we've not seen until Corbyn, who would, I've always thought, make a decent librarian.

At the time of writing 'Jack Straw' is a new poem, written five years after the *Speculatrix* poems and over a decade after those in *The Hutton Inquiry*. 'Jack

Straw' surprised me by fusing together the themes of *The Hutton Inquiry* with this new approach of using the language of previous literature. The poem brings together my interest in the early modern with my writing about the Iraq War. I never thought that would happen. These politicians who excuse themselves from the Darwinian clearance house, their prostatic secretions beginning with a walnut-sized arousal and ending with nerve gas in a stranger's face. The Labour cabinet's nuzzling of Bush prefigures Theresa May's coveting of a special relationship with Trump. Men in suits, nurturing a metastasis in their drying balls, flashing for the President, exposing far-off victims to their fantasies. Justifying apocalypse under the false pagoda of the prospective greatest good for all. Pleased with the flight paths of their career but confused by the vapourtrails. Greased hearts racing like apoplectic peasants.

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