

Ballads of the Alone

ALSO BY RUPERT M LOYDELL

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Rupert M Loydell

*Ballads
of the
Alone*

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Rupert Loydell's *Ballads of the Alone*

Contemporary poetry is not alone—it has the good company of contemporary visual art, contemporary classical and jazz music, dance, nowadays even literary fiction—in being often ignored, dismissed, or shied away from on the grounds that it is ‘difficult’. But that shying away indicates a misunderstanding at work: new poetry *is* often difficult, but not in the way ‘difficult’ is usually meant.

Something might be difficult in any of various ways: as chess is difficult (so nearly infinite in its complexity that it evades mastery), as climbing Mount Everest is difficult (physically demanding, dependent on extensive preparation and support), or as a calculus problem is difficult (susceptible to solution only by application of specialized knowledge and technique). Something might be difficult as playing the ‘Moonlight Sonata’ is difficult (contingent on talent honed by years of training and practice), as a spoiled child is difficult (demanding, belligerent, self-absorbed), or as a thoroughbred is difficult (high-strung, obstinate).

The contemporary poetry you hold in your hand, Rupert Loydell's *Ballads of the Alone*, is difficult, but not in any of those ways. A clue to what ‘difficult’ means in application to Loydell's work comes from its etymology. The English word ‘difficult’ originates in the Latin compound of the negative prefix *dis-* and the root *facilis* (‘easy’). Simply following that root back into English signals the sense of ‘difficult’ that best suits Loydell's work. It is *disfacilis*: i.e. it is *not facile*.

What is *facile* fulfills convention without resistance. Genre fiction (such as the mystery or romance novel) offers countless examples of the *facile*. If I read a mystery novel, I know before I buy the book exactly what to expect and when to expect it: a crime, probably a murder, will be committed early on, a detective will be called in to solve the crime, and so on. I even know when to expect the unexpected: I expect to be surprised by the revelation of the murderer's identity, when the detective reveals that, and how, the clues point to someone other than the person to whom I thought they pointed.

In contrast, what is *disfacilis*, difficult in the sense that *Ballads of the Alone* is difficult, may employ conventions but

will also, even *in* its employment of them, resist them. One set of conventions especially prominent in relation to *Ballads of the Alone* is that of *ekphrasis*, the description or evocation in poetry of another work of art. Surely the best-known example of ekphrastic poetry in English, John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', typifies the conventions of ekphrasis: description of the object in terms deferential enough to justify the attention paid it, leading up to an edifying synthesis, even a moral. Loydell draws on, or appeals to, ekphrastic conventions, but does so less to fulfill them than to challenge them.

The first element of Loydell's challenge to convention is his having chosen subjects and sources that themselves both employ and resist convention. Consider the photographers named as the subjects of Loydell's ekphrasis.

The first sequence here, 'Ballads of the Alone,' is composed, Loydell notes, 'after W. Eugene Smith,' to whom writer and photo historian Geoff Dyer attributes a 'dementia of seeing' (163). In Loydell's sequence, the dementia of seeing assumes various identities: a 'carnival logic of urban dreams', 'pictures in musical order' (as compared, for instance, to narrative order), 'dislocations', 'stolen and borrowed voices' gathered not into a choir over which the singular will of a conductor rules but into a party through which an overhearer may wander, tasting conversation after conversation. Dementia imposes a gap between memory and experience, signals a mind's withdrawal from correspondence into coherence.

The second sequence, 'Multiple Exposure,' is 'after Aaron Siskind'. Peter Turner describes Aaron Siskind's work as 'abandoned, mutilated leavings of man and nature, seen suspended in an inescapable dimension; forward movement blocked by surface, retreat into perspective no longer allowed' (n.p.). The 'abandoned, mutilated leavings' in Loydell's poems indicate 'a fascination with fragmentation' that 'looks like it says something' even though 'you never know just what it means'. Loydell's repeated end line, 'balance of time as well as form', resonates against the 'no longer' in Turner's description of Siskind. Loydell's leavings, like Siskind's, draw us into 'an older more essential world', densely inhabited but differently animated than our own, in which 'there is only absence'.

Loydell's third sequence, 'Wallflower', is 'after Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Deborah Turbeville. Noting a contrast between the typical family photograph and the photographs of Meatyard, which depict family members wearing masks, Elizabeth Siegel says, 'The family snapshot is always in 'directorial mode'—*hold still, say cheese, look over here*—to construct an ideal reality'. But with a twist in Meatyard's photographs, Siegel notes, because 'he controls the scene not to manufacture familial flawlessness, but to create mystery, trigger emotional associations, and encourage second looks' (128). Franca Sozzani says of Turbeville: 'When Deborah takes pictures every single detail is perfect yet wrong at the same time. She doesn't look for perfection but for casual order—her order. Unconventional' (7). Loydell's unconventionality becomes a 'soft focus view through broken glass', and his control of the scene creates 'strangers from invented time'. # 12 of 'Wallflower' includes a description that a reader could take as referring to the speaker of the poem: 'a man alone in a reinforced cage / collaging quotes and screams'.

'Different Chemistry', Loydell's fourth sequence, is 'after Joel-Peter Witkin', who Eugenia Parry describes as portraying 'the human figure as a repository of abjection', a mode of portrayal that takes us to a 'frontier' beyond our conventional self-understanding: 'What is base and contemptible', she says, has in Witkin's work 'the power to forge a frontier beyond the body; the abject shows us the borderline of our condition as living beings in order to provide the means by which we are able to lose ourselves, our 'I', symbolically, as witnesses to the horror, and in the process, recreate and restore ourselves' (n.p.). The frontier beyond the body in Loydell becomes 'a different kind of space' that is nevertheless, as the repeated last line of each poem in this sequence has it, 'the condition of our lives'. The abject becomes in Loydell 'the dark poetry by which we live', poetry because it invites/incites recreation of ourselves, dark because it witnesses the horror, the loss of ourselves.

Finally, 'A Product of Negotiation', the concluding sequence, is 'after Edgar Martins and Marco Breuer'. Andrea Aversa says of Martins that 'the flow of information usually deriving from a photo is replaced ... by interpretations. Through his process of disrupting our expectations of the image, Martins challenges judgments that are based upon what is perceived as 'real' or 'fake'.

In Loydell, the disruption that undercuts the distinction between real and fake also sabotages any certainty: over and over in the repeated last line of each poem, I can only *think* I have arrived. 'I think I have arrived' leaves more than one thing uncertain: the place, the arrival, the journey. Even I myself am made uncertain. Transformations become uncertain, and 'it is not what it seems' becomes true of *any* 'it'.

What I am trying to suggest is that the choice of ekphrastic subject, once complemented by the reciprocity that in composing the poems Loydell establishes between the photographers' work and his own, establishes a dialogue that can be continued in reading the poems. He is not so much pointing out lessons his subjects teach us ('Beauty is truth...') as venturing in his chosen medium experiments analogous to experiments they ventured in theirs, and thus inviting *us* to recapitulate—and to stretch or contest—those experiments. In other words, the choice of convention-challenging subjects occasions further challenges to convention, in process of composition, in 'form' and 'content' of the poems themselves (as if those were separable), and in their 'personal' and 'political' enactments as reading (as if *those* were separable). As a result, 'the poem forces us to expand our boundaries of what we think of as meaningful' (Bruns, 27). *Ballads of the Alone* does not merely *collect* its fragments as (in Heraclitus' formulation) 'a heap of random sweepings', but *arrays* them as a realization on the page of the 'biological operation' in the brain that Barbara Maria Stafford claims is 'akin to the rhetorical function of analogy' and is 'responsible for the synaesthetic convergences of discrete information distributed all over the brain occurring when we think coherently' (212). Thinking coherently, in other words, may be more *distributed* than localized, more arrayed than sequenced, more shuffled than hierarchized, more combinatory than monumental.

To borrow the words of David Mutschlecner, Loydell's book is a 'sapient / concatenation: / language braided with creation' (83). As words combined in relation to a linguistic grammar may result in discovery, so may fragments combined in relation to a 'grammar of collage'. *Ballads of the Alone* demonstrates that from attention to the made a moral or lesson (a *facile* and localized encapsulation of wisdom, a bromide) is not the only

form of edification, nor beauty the only value, nor simplicity and transparency the only form of invitation. Loydell takes us in these poems 'to see // reason at the point of exhaustion / fragmented and polarized'. His is a difficult vision, not a facile one. *Ballads of the Alone* presents 'a landscape of uncertainty', but reading it leads me to say what it says: 'I think I have arrived'.

H.L. Hix

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Ballads of the Alone

1. Ballads of the Alone

after W. Eugene Smith

‘Is the man walking into the dark or the light?’

'A photograph is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you, the less you know.'

—Diane Arbus

'I know how forgetting & photography make grief possible'

—Joshua Marie Wilkinson

1

towers shift down to abstract image
flames and sparks engulf a man
umbrella vase web x-ray zebra
a fragile child held still and poised
your wife will get old but not mine

time-warped doubt coherently mapped
carnival logic of urban dreams
jelly king lion mouse necklace
reading deeply into the texts of others
there is no way to the surface

hope will be merely a straw man
exposure is just the starting point
elephant fish goat hedgehog
shrewd self-preservation (legend pales)
stark contrast between dark and light

hunt through deserted corridors
slammed glass doors always shatter
goluptious gondola goitre gone
frustrated circulation and movement
reverse the orientation of matter

instant packaged exhibitions
and immediate comprehension
gorgeous gorget goodness goon
each monument an encounter
one more useless scrap of metal

prepared to enter is no trap at all
forms of resistance can end
gonfalon gopher godetia gong
gallery wall and cool white fluorescence
stark contrast between dark and light

lampshade hanging from a wire
pictures in musical order
untitled interior installation
desperate utopian compensation
ex-wife's new home in the suburbs

the rhythms of the city change
change by being repeated
untitled untitled hot-roll steel
filamented lines and textures
arranged in a receding space

a drink and something to eat
a triangle between two roads
plywood untitled exterior
no mention of photography
stark contrast between dark and light

long moments of sheer beauty
no chance of us returning
gas stations funeral parlours motels
a misguided group of electrons
criss-crossing both sidewalk and street

pools of light and streams of silk
almost medical intimacies
shoulders buttocks arms scuffed elbows
huge scale, glossy close-ups
accompanied by extended captions

the toolshed of childhood
secrets kept as long as could be
friendship madness passion death
stolen and borrowed voices
stark contrast between dark and light

past the gift shop and reception
ready to abandon time
casual silence early nights
thinking about warm water
breathing into airless lungs

ripping up carpets and settling in
a series of private meetings
marriages friends past lovers children
the world out back transfigured
no less than a second honeymoon

hand clamped over mouth
memory frosting over
glacier rockfall frozen sea
white noise of repression
stark contrast between dark and light

radio stations as instruments
how we eat our young
telephone scissors perimeter fence
find me some new sounds
re-shape, re-order everything

simmering becomes boiling
from gas to solid to liquid
correction collapse reversal
we all rolled down our windows
as the past rode up to talk

the king of the island
became what had been dream
ladder ocean orchard
the man who brings assertion
stark contrast between dark and light

god of the wind and rain
whirling rush of spinning earth
damask morocco sandgrain plain
floods scooping hollows in the rock
distant ridges still on fire

sharp-eyed curiosity
journeying across the map
ridged ripple stipple cord
contemplate lost specimens
despair lined up along the road

only imagine what will follow
self-cancelling perception
brocade coltskin linen lined
strategies restoring power
stark contrast between dark and light

dislocations such as this
explain intricacies of belief
bokhara vermillion forest birch
memories of familiar objects
dust spinning out behind

intimacy and confused love
I tend to go a little misty
emerald medina tabriz tan
no respect for nothing
all our lives are now in doubt

premonitions of disaster
travelling high vibrating lines
pristine oatmeal vellum mist
tiny flowers and fragile timbers
stark contrast between dark and light

a breeding-place of wind and drift
difficulty turned into song
kestrel fulmar sparrow dove
all the foghorns in the world
kilowatt hour by kilowatt hour

weaving through the debris
history apparently consumed
skylark tern flamingo thrush
high winds and pressure drop
dwellings on a hillside

I stand in need of explanation
images taken for granted
bullfinch plover lapwing kite
a passionate exercise in faith
stark contrast between dark and light

swept along by wind and tide
welcome guests to the evening
smoke scarlet kraft pearl
no time at the end of the world
how did you track me down?

a crowd of about two hundred
complained in thunderous voice
pink damascus citrine stone
a series of stylized tableau
the glove signifies the hand

contradict the new disorder
tortured and distorted flesh
sapphire violet maize fern
I am taking apart the genius machine
stark contrast between dark and light

walking upright from the forest
corridors between makeshift rooms
trout sturgeon cisco pike
portraits stare down from the walls
threatened with extinction

park the car off the public highway
is this the way to paradise park?
squawfish pupfish minnow chub
moving along the invisible road
not with prayers but slogans

dramatic close-ups and bleaching techniques
interference between stations
darter gambusia wetjaw toad
scratching and digging for a living
stark contrast between dark and light

proverbial swing of the pendulum
flashbulbs popping in the night
waffle warble wanton ward
a man without hands pounding glass
fed up with lying in state

back to the moment of explosion
we need no explanation
whether weather weasel warm
opposition seems to be shifting
the phone lines always adrift

negotiations breaking down
extolling the virtues of war
warrior warrant wheedle weep
diagonal movement out of the frame
stark contrast between dark and light