

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE  
*PORTRAITS AND REPETITION*  
Post Apollo, 2003, \$22

Stephen Ratcliffe has produced no less than 20 books in as many years, including the critical work *Listening to Reading* (SUNY, 2000) and a slew of highly influential collections of poetry, and yet he's managed to remain under the radar for many readers. Ratcliffe is one the most undersung writers of his generation, and curiously, he is also one of the most formally interesting. Bob Perelman says of Louis Zukofsky (another formally challenging and underappreciated craftsman), "It looks like [he] has a winning ticket in the lottery that Stendhal said all writers participate in: to be read in the century after they wrote." I hope for the sake of the New, New American Poetry that Ratcliffe doesn't hold a similar ticket. Luckily, we've been given another opportunity to familiarize ourselves with Ratcliffe's work, as 2003 saw the release of two new books, *SOUND / (system)* (Green Integer), a volume composed in the early '90s (and perhaps the clearest link between his earlier work and his current project), and *Portraits and Repetition*, the most cogent collection of his writing to date.

*Portraits and Repetition* succinctly captures the many nuances I find fascinating in Ratcliffe's work. Foremost in my mind are Ratcliffe's many self-imposed formal constraints. It's a pleasure to simply flip through the volume and marvel at the uniformity of the text. Each poem begins with the date on which it was written, starting with "2.9," and ending the following year with "5.28"—474 days of writing, and 474 poems to show for it. *Portraits* is the first book in a trilogy, each with its own unique form, and each exactly 474 pages long (the other two volumes, *REAL and CLOUD / RIDGE*, are both complete but as of yet unpublished). In *Portraits*, each poem is 10 lines in length, separated neatly into five couplets. The first line of each couplet is always 60 characters long, and the second, 57. One word per stanza is offset in parentheses (sometimes underlined and sometimes not), adding an interesting jolt to the line as it cuts the rhythm of the couplet, or better, adds a polyrhythm similar to a second voice interrupting the text from the outside.

What is ultimately so compelling about *Portraits* is its capacity to remain endlessly generative regardless (or maybe because) of these formal constraints. Sitting down to read such a dense book can be a bit disconcerting, especially when each consecutive page looks exactly the same. *Portraits and Repetition* is a fitting title, though, because, as with Stein, the work is ultimately not repetitive, even if its formal constraints are; instead, the project is endlessly insistent. Like Christian Bök's *Eunoia*, in which Bök composes poems using only a single vowel per chapter, *Portraits* "means" in spite of itself, even while working through self-imposed constraint; as one drifts through the careful nuances of the work, one unravels endlessly generative gestures of cognition.

The only writing I find similar to Ratcliffe's is the early work of Leslie Scalapino, and like Scalapino, Ratcliffe seems to be enmeshed in an Heisenbergian dilemma. While the poems shift from simple perceptions of life spiraling outside the author's window to surfing conditions in the bay, the relationships between lovers, and the flowers in the vase on the table, the writing is not simply the documentation of cognition. As in Heisenberg's principle, the act of observation itself affects the object or phenomena under observation. The writing in *Portraits* documents what is seen, but in so doing catalogs the "Real" into a grid of possibilities, perhaps, as Fanny Howe mentions on the back cover, into musical notations for a score. For example, on 12.7, Ratcliffe writes,

visual action of person moving above  
(content) second person  
for example, where moonlight seems to  
come down from left

underside of bird's white wings, whose  
disappearance follows  
(actual) perception of emerging green on  
surface of ridge

feeling in wall behind diagonal edge of  
darker shape on left  
intersected by observer's experience of it,  
(proposition)

(being) where grey light begins, opposite  
identity of planes

against which an image of thought itself  
seems to project

blue in upper right corner in relation of  
(how) hand touches  
texture of other side, which isn't exactly  
apparent to it

(302)

The poem reads as a collaged grid of sensation, and here the senses are working overtime, documenting phenomena they would normally be unable to detect. The effect is akin to a lexical tendon holding together multiple phenomena, in effect, becoming itself an object of experience. This is essentially what is most interesting for me as a reader: the poem acts (physically) to hold together disparate observations, and in so doing, creates intriguing relations that become the focal point of the work.

*Portraits and Repetition* is the realized document of over 20 years of experiments in observation and cognition. If it says anything about the work to come, and I think it does, Ratcliffe is on to something that is exciting in its careful and precise execution. His *Portraits* is the best sort of daybook: at once teeming with uninterrupted attention to phenomena, while remaining firmly rooted in the world of experience.

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