

ON “LATANOPROST VARIATIONS”

I STARTED TO WRITE THE ABANDONED¹ PROSE PIECE “LATANOPROST VARIATIONS” IN 2004 AFTER FINISHING MY FIRST BOOK OF POEMS *STRETCHERS* (EVENTUALLY PUBLISHED BY REALITY STREET IN 2006). THE TITLE IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE OBSCURE OR MISLEADING BUT IT COULD BE CONSTRUED AS BOTH OF THESE. “LATANOPROST” IS THE NAME OF A TOPICAL EYE DROP USED TO TREAT VARIOUS FORMS OF GLAUCOMA AND I FOUND IT PRINTED ON A CHEAP PLASTIC PEN IN THE FLAT OF A FRIEND I HAD RECENTLY MOVED IN WITH, UNDER THE BED IN FACT. IT BELONGED TO MY FRIEND’S BROTHER WHO HAD JUST MOVED OUT. HE WAS AN EYE SURGEON AND THE PEN WAS ONE OF THOSE OBJECTS USED BY PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES TO PROMOTE THEIR PRODUCTS (LATANOPROST WAS MANUFACTURED BY PFIZER UNDER THE BRAND NAME ‘XALATAN’). I STARTED OFF WRITING THE PIECE NOT ON A COMPUTER, AS I HAD BEGUN TO DO WITH MOST OF MY WORK BY THIS POINT, BUT INSTEAD USING THIS FOUND PEN WHOSE ANACHRONISTIC MATERIALITY I WANTED TO WORK WITH. THE ‘VARIATIONS’ OF THE TITLE GESTURE NOT WHOLLY UNIRONICALLY TO VARIATIONS IN MUSIC, BUT ARE REALLY JUST THE WORDS I WROTE DOWN USING MY NEW PEN.

AS I’VE SAID, THE PIECE ITSELF FOLLOWS ON FROM MY BOOK *STRETCHERS*. WRITING PROSE WITH A STRONG HORIZONTAL PULL AND USING PUNCTUATION² MADE A WELCOME CHANGE FROM THE PUNCTUATIONLESS POEMS OF *STRETCHERS* AND THEIR MAINLY VERTICAL THRUST. WITH HINDSIGHT, “LATANOPROST VARIATIONS” IS A BRIDGE BETWEEN *STRETCHERS* AND MY NEXT BOOK, *BIRD BIRD*, A SERIES OF PROSE POEMS ABOUT BRITISH BIRDS WHOSE SHAPE IS ALSO PRIMARILY HORIZONTAL (OR LANDSCAPE IF YOU LIKE, FITTING FOR ITS SUBJECT MATTER). LOOKING BACK AT IT I WAS TRYING TO FURTHER DEVELOP THE NAÏVE VOICE I HAD BEEN USING IN *STRETCHERS*, PUSHING IT IN NEW DIRECTIONS BY PLAYING WITH SOME ASPECTS OF THE NEW SENTENCE. THIS VOICE ACTUALLY COMES QUITE CLOSE TO MADNESS AT TIMES. I HAD JUST BEEN READING JOHN CLARE’S “JOURNEY OUT OF ESSEX” AND THE ARMED CONFLICT IN IRAQ WAS PRODUCING ATROCITIES THAT WERE INCREASINGLY IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE. THE VARIATIONS, THEN, WERE ALSO ATTEMPTS TO ARTICULATE DAILY LIFE UNDER THESE CONDITIONS, THOUGH OFTEN DISTORTEDLY AND TO THE EXTENT OF ABSURDITY. MAKING A COUNTRY BY SEWING TOGETHER TURNIPS IS NOT AN ENTIRELY PRAGMATIC ENDEAVOUR BUT IT SEEMED AS GOOD AN ANALOGY FOR BRITAIN AS I COULD COME UP WITH AT THE TIME, A BRITAIN RULED BY THE TWIN HORRORS OF THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND DAYTIME TV WITH ITS THEN KING AND QUEEN, RICHARD MADELEY AND JUDY FINNEGAN, WHO WERE TO EXERT AN UNPRECEDENTED POWER OVER THE READING HABITS OF THE POPULATION THROUGHOUT THE DECADE WITH THEIR SO-CALLED ‘BOOK CLUB’. MY PHRASE “RICHARD IS STRANGER THAN JUDY” IS OF COURSE ALSO A NOD TO THE GREAT ENGLISH MUSICIAN ROBERT WYATT AND HIS, BY CONTRAST, EXEMPLARY POLITICS.

ALTHOUGH SOME OF THE VARIATIONS ARE PRIVATE, OTHERS CONTINUE TO ALLUDE TO HIGHLY PUBLICISED EVENTS. THE ‘MAN IN A SEE-THROUGH BOX’ IS A

¹ “Abandoned” is perhaps too grandiose a word to describe what happened to a piece which really hardly even got underway.

² The original version used full stops which I have subsequently replaced with forward slashes.

REFERENCE TO THE AMERICAN ILLUSIONIST DAVID BLAINE WHO HAD IN LATE 2003 LIVED FOR 44 DAYS WITHOUT FOOD IN A PLEXIGLASS CUBE SUSPENDED ABOVE THE THAMES AT TOWER BRIDGE (JUST AROUND THE CORNER FROM THE FLAT I LIVED IN). THIS NARCISSISTIC DISPLAY OF PRIVATION MASQUERADING AS HEROISM SEEMED TO ME OBSCENE IN THE LIGHT OF MORE PRESSING INCARCERATION AND TORTURE IN ABU GHRAIB AND GUANTANAMO BAY. PERHAPS I MISSED THE POINT. I SHOULD SAY THAT AT THE SAME TIME AS WRITING “LATANOPROST VARIATIONS” I WAS ALSO TRYING TO RESPOND MORE DIRECTLY TO THE IRAQ WAR IN A BRIEF SERIES OF VISUAL POEMS CALLED “SLATES.” COMPOSED WITH THE SAME PEN AND WITH MY NON-WRITING HAND TO MIMIC THE HANDWRITING OF A CHILD, I THEN USED PHOTOSHOP TO PRODUCE THE RESULTANT IMAGES IN NEGATIVE, WHITE ON BLACK. THEY LOOKED TO ME LIKE THE SLATE-BOARDS USED IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS AND THE LANGUAGE I EMPLOYED WAS, LIKE IN THE VARIATIONS, DELIBERATELY INGENUOUS, BUT BLUNTER AND LESS OPAQUE. I COULDN’T THINK OF ANY OTHER WAY TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

AT TIMES IN 2004 IT SEEMED LIKE WE WERE LIVING THROUGH END TIMES AND THERE ARE CERTAINLY SOME APOCALYPTIC SCENARIOS IN “LATANOPROST VARIATIONS.” MY PERSONAL LIFE AT THE TIME WAS NOT TOO GREAT EITHER AND AT THE END OF THE YEAR MY FRIEND AND FLATMATE DIED SUDDENLY OF A HEART ATTACK. IT WOULD BE TOO NEAT TO SAY THAT I ABANDONED³ THE PIECE AS A RESULT OF HIS DEATH. THE TRUTH IS I HAD GIVEN IT UP MIDWAY THROUGH THE YEAR FOR OTHER REASONS – PARTLY BECAUSE IT WAS TAKING ME TOO LONG TO WRITE, PARTLY BECAUSE I WAS BECOMING BORED WITH THE FORM AND COULDN’T THINK OF CONTINUING TO ADDRESS SHEILA JORDAN, THE AMERICAN JAZZ SINGER WHOSE WORK I HAD NO INTEREST IN AT ALL,⁴ AND PARTLY BECAUSE I HAD BEGUN IN EARNEST THE BIRD POEMS THAT WERE TO OCCUPY ME FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS. HOWEVER, THINGS WERE TO TAKE A STRANGE TURN WHEN I WAS SOON AFTER DIAGNOSED WITH EARLY ONSET GLAUCOMA AND PRESCRIBED LATANOPROST AS A TREATMENT WHICH I CONTINUE TO USE TO THIS DAY. IN LATE 2012 PFIZER’S PATENT FOR THE DRUG EXPIRED AND A HOST OF OTHER PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES BEGAN TO MANUFACTURE GENERIC VERSIONS OF IT MORE CHEAPLY. I LOST THE PEN I DON’T RECALL WHERE OR WHEN. “SLATES” FOR THE MOST PART REMAINS UNPUBLISHED.

³ See footnote 1

⁴ I don’t remember why I chose her as my interlocutor.