

Logbook: Against Prose

‘What I want is a kaleidoscope, not a telescope’ (*A Serial Biography*)¹

Tom Raworth’s *Logbook* (1976) is one of the most stylistically original and mentally acrobatic examples of a fugitive genre in twentieth-century British poetry: the prose poem sequence. Even within Raworth’s own, formally various oeuvre, prose poetry is a relative rarity. There are a handful of other pieces to be found in the five-hundred-plus pages of his *Collected Poems* (2003), including one other sequence, ‘Pretense’ (1979). In 2009, these were joined by *There Are Few People Who Put On Any Clothes (starring it)*, a lost-and-found manuscript from 1972. *Logbook* itself, according to its final page, was written November–December 1970 in Colchester, England, where Raworth had recently studied Latin American literature and literary translation at the University of Essex. The previous year saw the publication of *A Serial Biography*, a fragmentary memoir of incisive sentences and self-enquiry. In 1971, he would conduct the correspondence with Ed Dorn that became ‘Letters from Yaddo’ (1987). The letters demonstrate his gift for prose as wittily lateral and improvisational as his poems – Marjorie Perloff considers the whole ‘essentially a poetic text’, although the author himself chose to include it in his collected prose, *Earn Your Milk* (2009). *Logbook*, ‘Letters from Yaddo’ and ‘Notebook’, a journal-like sequence in verse and prose dated January–February 1971, were intended to be published together in the States as a Frontier Press book called *Cancer*, but this never materialised, resulting in their chronologically dispersed appearance instead.² *Tracking*, a short set of verse and prose jottings which appeared in the States from Ray DiPalma’s Doones Press in 1972, seems to be of a piece and a period with these writings.

This brief history of the writing of Raworth’s work in prose locates *Logbook* in the middle of his most concerted period of experiment activity with the form (1969–1972). There is perhaps a prophetic irony about the way in which – as the central poetic work of these years – it seems to foresee a scattered textual fate, offering itself to the reader as ten randomly salvaged, numbered pages from a sea voyage (‘106, 291, 298, 301, 345, 356, 372, 399, 444 and 453’). The dispersed publication history of this work from the early Seventies means that prose has appeared to be a recurring mode in the oeuvre. But unlike John Ashbery, for example, who made the prose poem an elegant garment in his formal wardrobe at around the same, Raworth has not returned to prose poetry in later years. In the three-and-a-half decades of writing that followed the appearance of ‘Pretense’ (*Four Door Guide*, 1979), his poetry has been almost exclusively an art of verse. *Logbook* stands, then – like its close contemporary in British poetry, Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* (1971) – as an experiment that distils something of the essence of its author’s voice, while also being a piece of perversity, the banishment of lyric verse into its formal antithesis. It is not, however, a hybrid that falls readily into step with its shadow: in *Logbook*, prose is illuminated from within as the cultural logic of the enemy, ‘the real, cold,

¹ Tom Raworth, *Earn Your Milk: Collected Prose* (Cambridge: Salt, 2009), p. 5.

² Marjorie Perloff, ‘Filling the Space with Trace: “Letters from Yaddo”’, in *Removed for Further Study: on the Poetry of Tom Raworth*, ed. Nate Dorward, *The Gig* 13/14 (2003), pp. 130–44 (pp. 130–31). The 1971 ‘Notebook’ sequence was first published in this special issue, while ‘Letters from Yaddo’ appeared in the volume *Invisible Shivers* (1987).

science' of authoritarianism and imperialism that Raworth's other poetry systematically disorders with the gapping scalpel of his unpunctuated verse.³

'would have explained it.' begins *Logbook*, page '106'.⁴ But without the rest of the sentence, it's not possible to say *what* 'it' it would have explained. 'Would have', moreover, suspends the off-stage explanation in a narrative past somewhere between an expected event and a speculative non-event ('I knew some critic would have explained it' versus 'I doubt any critic would have explained it'). However we might reconstruct it, the explanation itself, like the start of the sentence, is not *present* – in fact or tense. The first four words of *Logbook* are an elliptical epigraph to the rest, a practical joke that echoes a characteristic resistance in Raworth's work to the prosaic business of explaining poems. 'this poem has been removed for further study' runs his one-line squib 'University Days' – the text enclosed in an official little rectangle, like a curatorial card in an art gallery – and the forking of temporality is again diagrammatic: past and future conditions for 'this poem' point to its present absence.⁵ As John Wilkinson observes of the beginning of *Ace* (1974) – the long poem of short, disjunctive lines that Raworth wrote after the period of prose experiment that produced *Logbook* – we are warned against a reading that 'strain[s] for an impossible fidelity [...] for nothing could be more absurdly out of key with the poem's evading of summation'.⁶

Unlike the semantic meteor shower of *Ace*, however, which is explicitly not-prose in the chiming arguments it makes by lateral association across line breaks ('the energy / gaps again / let light / blink / history think'), *Logbook* continues to keep the possibility of linear explanation in play.⁷ One way in which it does this is by weaving in the arcane propositions of expert knowledge. The second, full sentence runs: 'But asymptosy seems destined to leave it to Vespucci.'⁸ In mathematics, an asymptote (Greek: 'not falling together') refers to a line that approaches a curve but only meets it at infinity. 'Seems destined to leave it to' is, therefore, a drily accurate description of asymptotic behaviour. Assuming that we are still looking for some kind of continuous logic between sentences at this point, 'it' either refers back to the explanation of the first sentence fragment or whatever it 'would have explained'. But with the asymptote as the proposed figure, that explanation seems to have been either infinitely deferred or lost among the pages of time (the only recorded usage in the *OED* of the archaic 'asymptosy' is by Thomas Hobbes). The grammatical destiny of the sentence, nevertheless, is historically precise: Amerigo Vespucci, the seventeenth-century Italian navigator who explored

³ *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 86.

⁴ *Collected Poems*, p. 83.

⁵ *Collected Poems*, p. 136. In the most recent reprinting of *Logbook* – *As When: A Selection* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015), ed. Miles Champion – each section is similarly enclosed in a page-like rectangle. For another squib that plays on the theme of critical interpretation as an activity complicit with the forces of authority, see 'Tell Me What This is About': 'Take this hammer / give it to the captain' (*Collected Poems*, p. 138) Both appear in *Heavy Light* (London: Actual Size Press, 1984), which Raworth composed one year after *Logbook* while travelling across America by Greyhound bus in the winter of 1971–2.

⁶ John Wilkinson, 'Tripping the Light Fantastic: Tom Raworth's *Ace*', in *The Lyric Touch* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp. 105–19 (p. 106).

⁷ *Collected Poems*, p. 201.

⁸ *Collected Poems*, p. 83.

the coast of South America, and who eventually gave the continent its colonised name – a history of particular significance to this poem, with its repeated references to sea voyages, words in translation, and the imagining of the American continent.

If we continue to read the first page of *Logbook* according to what, in his 1979 essay on the poetics of ‘The New Sentence’, Ron Silliman calls the ‘syllogistic capacity’ of the prose paragraph – that is, the way in which sentences accumulate meaning at the level of reference⁹ – the next three sentences potentially offer an authorial comment on the tussle so far between the logical and the nonsensical:

The two styles fight even for my handwriting. Their chemicals, even, produce nothing more than wax in the ears and an amazing thirst. That seems to ‘even’ things, for those who regard it as a *balance*, or think the wind blows *one way*.

The word that connects all three sentence here is ‘even’: first, as an adverb emphasising extremity or oddity; and secondly, as a verb meaning to make equal. In the middle sentence, both ‘even’s make equal sense: if it is not, again, adverbial, it may refer, adjectivally, to the 50/50 formula of a chemical process. The final sentence, however, upsets the appletart of the well-made paragraph, with an impatient caricature of ‘those’ explanatory types who want the world to fall into neat binaries of opposing forces (or double meanings), rather than recognise it as a place of wild and contradictory cross-winds. This is the world of the next sentence, which switches to the ostensible ‘logbook’ narrative of the sequence, and then to a truncated quotation from *Macbeth* 2.ii: ‘our voyage was perilous. Multitudinous seas incarnadine’.¹⁰

Logbook’s opening run of syllogistic non sequiturs recalls the authoritative rhythm and donnish tone of a parodic piece of prose, solely or jointly authored by Raworth, which gives an explicitly political thrust to his mockery of the mentality of ‘balance’. It appeared as a letter in a 1967 ‘spoo’ issue of the little avant-garde magazine, *The English Intelligencer*, which Raworth produced in collaboration with Anselm Hollo. Supposedly written by the poet John James to Andrew Crozier (the magazine’s founding editor), the peremptory manner of the letter burlesques the bullish intellectual lance-breaking of the contributors, who were largely Cambridge-educated young men encouraged by the example of Charles Olson to make knock-down statements about the history of everything:

Dear Andrew,

At our last meeting you didn’t say much, in fact nothing. I can understand this, but not that. The conflicting philosophies of the 18th century, whatever their superficial differences, belong to their age. Hobbes’ materialist approach; Locke’s political philosophy. Berkeley asserted that the only things that exist are ideas. But he was Irish – do we admit him?¹¹

⁹ Ron Silliman, ‘The New Sentence’, in *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987), pp. 63–93 (p. 80).

¹⁰ *Collected Poems*, p. 83.

¹¹ *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer*, ed. Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison and Luke Roberts (Cambridge: Mountain Press, 2012), p. 111.

With the nonsensical see-saw of the second sentence here, the parody establishes a rhythm of pseudo-opposition that goes on to sum up ‘the 18th century’ as a philosophical push-me-pull-you of Hobbes and Locke (compare *Logbook*, ‘356’: How neatly all the solutions are labelled “Paradox”!).¹² The complication that Berkeley might introduce to this lecture-room binary is brusquely dismissed by racist Anglocentric reflex. Raworth himself was Irish on his mother’s side, while Hollo was a Finnish poet living in the States. James Cummins comments that the spoof issue’s satire of entitlement and insularity make it clear ‘that Raworth and Hollo believe that *The English Intelligencer* is a journal built not only on an exclusive coterie but one defined by nationality, and that this form of nationalism is both worrying and dangerous’.¹³

It’s not clear whether Raworth and Hollo realised at the time that the named target of their parody, John James, was, in fact, Welsh. But the letter is not so much a mockery of an individual, however, as a rhetorical manner that is revealed to be more and more complicit in the politics of cultural superiority:

A ‘friend’ whom I once considered literate, said to me on seeing some copies of the journal (he, his great-grandmother being 2/3 Lithuanian, does not receive copies) ‘But where are the poems?’ And what can one say in the face of such stupidity except that which I did say, under my breath. ‘Gesundheit’ he replied, and that is how our language is corrupted.¹⁴

The patronising depiction of the ‘friend’ in this anecdote, and the anxiety about linguistic and racial purity that it exposes, foreshadows the encounter in the next section of *Logbook* (‘291’) with the ‘natives’ living in ‘the countryside of *Whimsy*’, whom the colonial adventurers of the text casually exploit, romanticising their material rapaciousness as a poetic quest: ‘Stripping bark from each native to reveal our track we followed one string of dulcimer notes after another’ (compare the Abyssinian ‘damsel with a dulcimer’ in Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’, whose music symbolises the lyric poet’s longing for the imperial power of the eponymous Khan).¹⁵ When the natives speak, however, it seems that the joke may ultimately be on the strangers from the boat:

‘Let us,’ said one of the natives whose language we could speak, but imperfectly, ‘build from these trees a thing which we call a “ship” – from the wood remaining I will show you how to make “paper” – on this “paper” (once we set sail) I shall show you how to “write” (with a charred twig from the same tree) – and if your grandmother is with you, here’s how we suck eggs.’¹⁶

¹² *Collected Poems*, p. 86.

¹³ James Cummins, “‘The history of Ireland he knew before he went to school’: The Irish Tom Raworth”, in *Irish University Review* (2016), 46.1, pp. 158–170 (p. 168). In this article Raworth confirms, in correspondence with Cummins, that he produced the spoof issue with Hollo, as had long been rumoured.

¹⁴ Pattison et al, eds., p. 112.

¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 250.

¹⁶ *Collected Poems*, pp. 83–84.

The native, in other words, is proposing to teach them how to write a logbook (literally so, if we follow the buried pun between ‘wood’ and ‘paper’).¹⁷ The scene creates a loophole in the linearity of the sequence: previously, on page ‘106’, we were told that the anonymous narrator of the logbook had been rescued from a ‘perilous’ voyage by a ‘small craft’ that ‘went sailing into the sunset, carrying only ten pages of my logbook (106, 291, 298, 301, 345, 356, 372, 399, 444 and 453), slightly charred by the slow still silent instant’.¹⁸ Now, though, at the end of page ‘291’, we get an inverted version of the same event:

From the shore we watched the ‘ship’ approach us. We set sail in small craft to meet the strangers, pausing only to write pages 106, 291, 298, 301, 345, 356, 372, 399, 444 & 453 of the logbook, charring¹⁹

Kit Robinson writes of *Logbook* that:

The sea-voyage theme, as in the nineteenth-century adventure novels of Jules Verne or Robert Louis Stevenson, suggests its obverse, the cozy, bourgeois domesticity by which the individual is secured from imagination’s perilous seas (a boat is a room).

Logbook is a text whose own composition is constantly coming into view, but, as Robinson observes, the ‘violent swivelling and physical rupture of Raworth’s prose’ disturbs any sense of a secure world of reference on the other side of the meta-narrative.²⁰ The sequence’s satirical temper, however, is also too sceptical to indulge in the simple valorisation of avant-garde ‘violen[ce]’ over ‘domestic’ realism. Raworth was well aware of the recent legend of the Beat writers and their ‘spontaneous’, jazz-inspired attitude to verse and prose, including Jack Kerouac’s infamous continuous typing of *On the Road* (1957) onto a single scroll of paper over three weeks (‘Kerouac was the last to try to get all the way round before the bell rang for time’, Raworth remarks to Dorn in ‘Letters from Yaddo’).²¹ In *Logbook* ‘298’, the author appears to us as just such a heroic character, albeit one whose rapid typing can’t quite keep up with the rapidity of the passing moment. Smoking a cigarette, ‘pausing nly to drop an “o”’, he becomes distracted by what is in the waste paper basket, then what is out the window, until finally ‘I reach the end of my sentence’:

At the same moment the record changes. I type in time to the snare drum ‘every branch blows a different way.’ Ash fills my fingerprints making a soft cushioning sound as I type on, pausing only this time to watch my fingers move, have a pain

¹⁷ The joke is developed by Frances Butler’s illustrations for the original Poltroon Press edition (Berkeley, 1976), which include a ‘Famous One-Log House’, apparently carved from a single trunk, though split by the printed book over two pages.

¹⁸ *Collected Poems*, p. 83.

¹⁹ *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

²⁰ Kit Robinson, ‘Tom Raworth’, in *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland since 1960 Part 2: M–Z*, ed. Vincent B. Sherry, Jr. (Detroit, Gale Research, 1985), pp. 459–468 (p. 463).

²¹ *Earn Your Milk*, p. 109.

in my stomach, pay close attention to three words in the lyric. Now it is almost time for²²

Here the narration breaks off blank at the bottom corner, as a typewritten page does. The virtuoso absurdity of a text that tells us exactly what is going on while it is being written – even when the author is ‘pausing’ – recalls a passage in *A Serial Biography* where Raworth considers the procrastinating gap between his desire to write and his domestic circumstances as a man who has just ‘put the children to bed’:

I thought about it. How it should start where I was lying in bed thinking about it then GOT UP and did it. Right I thought, I’ll get up. In some way make myself MOVE after the last three years. And immediately thought I’d go to sleep and do it in the morning. But fake it. Write it as though I HAD got up.²³

With Sterne-like comedy, Raworth here examines the ‘fake[ry]’ involved in the spontaneous (the famous scroll of *On the Road* was, in reality, the final draft of a long revised work). It is not sufficient, in *Logbook*, for prose simply to accelerate into pure poetry, ‘until finally writing becomes the only thing that is not a petroleum by-product’ (‘301’). This is writing which knows itself to be the product of material circumstances, in which the individual on the freewheeling American road trip is as much a result of chemistry as metaphysics (‘Sodium rode in the bus taking care not to sweat’, ‘372’).²⁴

Ron Silliman suggests in ‘The New Sentence’ that the French Symbolist poets used prose as an ‘ideal device for the dematerialization of writing’, a form by which hallucinatory visions could be written down in extended, dream-like sentences without the artificial interruption of versification.²⁵ With its rhythmic stops and starts, and narrative continuities and refusals, *Logbook* deliberately pops the bubble of the prose poem as a lyrical form floating above history (Rod Mengham: ‘Intermittent form is the basis of a text which is the presence of history, exactly like a log-book: not wholly irregular but punctuated by a regularity which is transitory, “slightly charred by the slow still silent instant”.’)²⁶ The final and shortest section, which sounds a defeated note from the first (‘I’m not going to make it to the lift in time’), tells how ‘the queen’s picture flickers into a limp book called Jimi Hendrix because all the books are dead & we live where the edges overlap’. At this point in the original 1976 edition we can see the final words of the text – ‘Colchester, November–December 1970’ – and we may remember that Hendrix, the great improvisatory rock guitarist, died in London in September 1970. The prophetic vision of *Logbook*’s conclusion is of a dead land in the grip of a prosaic culture that is entranced by pseudo-rational forms of art and news, but deaf to words in their poetic aspect as (spoken) sound:

²² *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

²³ *Earn Your Milk*, p. 27.

²⁴ *Collected Poems*, p. 85, p. 87.

²⁵ Silliman, p. 81.

²⁶ Rod Mengham, ‘from Logarithms’, in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), pp. 261–63 (p. 262).

The material is transparent, but the seam is already ripping down from Orion. And I am busily sweeping up the last few words in a country without an ear, whose artists are busy filling in the colours they've been allocated in the giant painting-by-numbers picture of themselves, because they think an interview with the man (now a physicist in Moscow) who was the boy on the Odessa Steps *makes a connection*. Full moon. High tide. Because it's all gesture, and nobody ever talked in words.²⁷

The final sentence fragment of *Logbook* seems to agree with Mallarmé: 'actually, there is no such thing as prose: there is the alphabet, and then there are verses'. 'Nobody ever talked in words' because we only ever speak rhythmically, running words together, and 'poetry is everywhere in language, so long as there is rhythm'.²⁸ Prose at its coldest mutes the distraction of sound, mechanically aligning words to *make a connection* by additive meaning (writing-by-numbers). 'In prose', writes Raworth's friend and contemporary, J.H. Prynne,

there is generally a quite closely defined channel or corridor of sense-making, following the sequence of phrases and sentences, with a serial progressive development which is not distracted by word-sounds or by excess of side-meanings – incidental or accidental semantic possibilities that lie outside the main channel. But in certain types of 'difficult' poetry this corridor of sense is much wider and more open, more like a network across the whole expanse of the text, with many loops and cross-links of semantic and referring activity which extend the boundaries of relevance, and of control by context, in many directions at once.²⁹

This well describes the 'poetic' quality of *Logbook*, and the omnidirectional loops and glitches that it ravel around the 'corridor of sense-making'.³⁰ But Prynne's underlying metaphor of restriction and freedom also suggests why, after the early Seventies, Raworth largely abandoned the 'defined channel' of prose for verse – a decision perhaps implied by the end of his second prose-poem sequence from this period, *There Are Few People Who Put On Any Clothes (starring it)*, written mid-1972, although not published until 2009:

I turn back and copy, unable to separate into a book of poems:

²⁷ *Collected Poems*, p. 88. Compare 'Letters from Yaddo': 'I live in a country whose poets are afraid of the dark and the wind because they carry burning books outside, which are soon blown out' (*Earn Your Milk*, p. 109).

²⁸ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Evolution of Literature', in *Selected Prose Poems, Essays and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), pp. 18–24 (p. 19).

²⁹ J.H. Prynne, 'Difficulties in the Translation of "Difficult" Poems', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 1.3 (2010), pp. 151–66 (p. 155).

³⁰ In a short but perceptive appreciation of Raworth's writing, Trevor Joyce suggests that the linebreaks in his later poems – such as the fourteen-liners of *Eternal Sections* (1993) – 'feel a little like those ellipses in the prose' of *A Serial Biography* ('Tom Raworth: "Put it together yourself. Fit the pieces. Make me work."', *Enclave Review*, 1 (Summer 2010), p. 4).

STARGRAM

His thoughts were unrelated

mortar mortar

I have my ship

finding ways to pull the view past faster³¹

JEREMY NOEL-TOD / 3,800 words

Abstract:

Tom Raworth's *Logbook* (1976) is considered as the central poetic text of a period of experimentation with prose which ran from 1969–1972, but which had a dispersed publication history. Through consideration of Raworth's role in a parodic issue of the late Sixties avant-garde magazine, *The English Intelligencer*, *Logbook* is shown to satirise prose itself as the formal medium of both academic discourse and imperial power, giving it affinities with the Language poetics of the 'New Sentence' in North America. Raworth's dissatisfaction with the limitations of prose as a medium emerges through close-reading of the sequence's comic and fragmentary rapidity.

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³¹ Tom Raworth, *There Are Few People Who Put On Any Clothes (starring it)* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2009), p. 27.