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THE POET AND THE SHAMAN
IN *THE PROPHETIC BOOK* BY CRAIG RAINE

The Prophetic Book, consisting of seven parts and the author's notes, was first published in book form in a limited edition in 1988¹, yet most of its sections had previously appeared independently in various periodicals over a span of several years². This may suggest that originally the parts of *The Prophetic Book* were written as separate poems in their own right³. And indeed they succeed as such. However, the relatively self-contained nature of the parts of this long poem and their independent publishing history do not mean that *The Prophetic Book* has a loose, undefined structure. On the contrary, the reader can easily identify a set of motifs which organize the sequence as a whole, give it a rigorous integrity and shape, and establish recurring, meaningful patterns. The poem astonishes the reader with its variety of modes, moods, themes. One can find here a love lyric and a narrative sequence, a quasi-documentary report and an unabashed display of imaginative faculty, autobiographical passages and the use of persona. *The Prophetic Book* works as a whole, the integrity of which is produced by the motif of a journey – it is a journey through time and space, into one's own past and into history, a journey through different stages and various aspects of human life. The concept of the poet and the shaman belongs to this motif.

¹ C. Raine, *The Prophetic Book*, Correspondance des Arts, Łódź 1988.

² Part I, slightly changed, was published first in "London Review of Books", 20 September 1984. Part VI, *A Chest of Drawers*, originally appeared in "Ploughshares" 1987, Vol. 13, No. 4.

³ During a BBC Radio 3 broadcast, 23 October 1989, Craig Raine said that "*The Prophetic Book* was not planned, though it has a coherent plan". According to his words, the last part was "composed years in advance of the poem it now concludes". The programme produced by Judith Bumpus featured a reading of *The Prophetic Book* by Alan Bennett, Stephanie Cole, the author and his eldest son, Isaac.

The first part of *The Prophetic Book*, which bears the same title as the whole poem, is addressed to a yet-unborn child of the poet (his second son, Moses):

I will grant you the world
that is taken for granted:
the turban in a tangerine,
a snooker table, say,
with six suspensory bandages,
the lemon squeezer
in the men's urinal.

The world that the poet is ready to offer to the child-to-be is both the real world which the child will soon have to confront and the whole poem, *The Prophetic Book*, which opens with this statement. The poet-as-father will grant the world by giving life to the new human being; the father-as-poet will grant the world by showing his son "the extraordinary variety of ordinary life on earth"⁴, by teaching him how to delight in it. Expectations which the phrase in the first line arouses, are immediately defeated by the second line, which by skilful handling of an idiomatic expression undermines the seemingly unambiguous statement of the previous line. Both verbs of the idiom "take for granted" contribute to this effect of defeated expectancy: the gift that the poet intends to give is the gift usually **taken**, not given. It becomes problematic then, whether it is a gift at all, since the donor disappears – there is no place for generosity, good will or love that the act of giving implies. There is only the readiness to take what exists within the reach of any human being. There is no need to grant anything that can simply be taken. Yet, in the opening of the poem, what is taken and accessible to anyone turns into what is given, into something that is precious and rare.

By punning on the word "grant" the poem – already in the first two lines – contrasts two attitudes, seemingly linked but as different as giving and taking. While the first line introduces the idea of gift and generosity, the second line implies such concepts as ordinariness and obviousness. Although the idiomatic phrase suggests that the gift (i.e. the world) is not to be questioned (since it is taken for granted), its appearance in the clause next to the solemn, dignified declaration, "I will grant you the world", undermines its meaning and invites scrutiny. It is only then that the most ordinary world will show its extraordinary manifestations.

The whole first section of the poem is composed of a catalogue of mundane things⁵. The main feature of this catalogue is the haphazard, random selection

⁴ Craig Raine on BBC Radio 3, 23 October 1989.

⁵ The use of the catalogue in the poetry of Craig Raine is further discussed in my book *The Uses of the Commonplace in Contemporary British Poetry*, Wydawnictwo UŁ, Łódź 1994.

of the objects mentioned in the following stanzas. The list evokes an impression of chaos, so powerful that it may even seem inappropriate to use the word "selection" in this context. There appears to be no principle according to which these, and no other, objects have been mentioned. Each image is an isolated act of perception which seems not to lead anywhere. The list of things is subject neither to the principle of similarity, cohesion, contiguity, nor does it follow any form of identifiable association. The ultimate effect of the list is that of chaos, anarchy, disorder, or – to put it more positively – variety, opulence, multiplicity and richness. The world of gifts.

It is not by chance that the poem starts unashamedly with the pronoun "I". The opulence evoked by itemizing the ordinary world is in the eye of the beholder. The catalogue of objects is also the catalogue of individual acts of perception. The poem celebrates the world taken for granted, but even more so it celebrates the world which can be given. The difference between the passive, impersonal meaning of "is taken" and the active personal "I will grant you" points to the attitude which is in fact the real subject of the first part of the poem: the creative rendering of the multifaceted world which turns it into a source of inexhaustable surprise and delight. It is memory and imagination which enliven the world, changing the commonplace list into the most unusual kaleidoscope of momentary revelations⁶. If in the first image of the poem one reads about "the turban in a tangerine", it is not so much the intriguing shape of the fruit that is celebrated but the gift of the eye, or the "I", which can make the connection between the two objects. These acts of perception which find links between the most distant, unrelated things, and which constitute the most essential part of Raine's Martian Poetics⁷, are instances of a continuing process of confronting the world without the help of received ideas, clichés, and stereotypes. The order which is given can be rejected (or suspended) in the name of new, fresh, bold perception. Paradoxically, in Raine's vision the opposition between order and chaos is solved by choosing the latter. It is chaos that guarantees freedom and demands a creative approach. Order, which having categorized the world makes life easier, actually extinguishes man's natural inclination to question and rely on one's immediate sensations, on one's personal, if momentary, truth. Raine wrote once that he likes "art which pays attention, which remembers, which records, which prefers what is actually true to what is merely ideal, which imposes chaos on order"⁸. The poet's attack on order is not a nihilistic one: it does not

⁶ See also my article: *Inne spojrzenie Craiga Raine'a*, "Akcent" 1988, nr 1, republished in: C. Raine, *Księga proroców i inne wiersze*, Biblioteka, Łódź 1992.

⁷ The tendency started by Craig Raine was labelled by the critics Martian Poetry after Raine's popular poem *A Martian Sends A Postcard Home*.

⁸ Craig Raine's statement published in the British Council pamphlet from *Contemporary Writers* series, London 1988.

claim that being is in fact nothingness and human existence has no meaning. Chaos in Raine's vision becomes a precondition of active life, which is capable of evoking pleasure. The irony lies in the fact that Raine's preference for chaos leads him to a position very rare in contemporary poetry: the celebrations of life, composing "hymns to Life or Nature, [...] the inexhaustible source of all sights, whose bounty the poet harvests and transmutes into words"⁹.

Raine's introduction of the catalogue-form in the first part of *The Prophetic Book*, as well as in the sixth section, displays all the essential features of a catalogue: it is a list of objects which are utterly unrelated except for the fact that they appear on the same list. These objects belong to the most distant categories – natural products appear next to the products of civilization (tangerine and snooker table), familiar objects meet exotic ones (Kentish hopfields and flamingoes), high culture is followed by low, mundane products (Goethe and hardware store), the miniature is listed together with the huge (scarab beetle and steam-roller), human beings with inanimate things (ballerina and sellotape).

There can be no doubt as to the identity of the speaker of the poem. The "I" that opens the poem is the person who will grant the world, i.e. who will offer new images of things "taken for granted". The world offered by the speaker is primarily what follows after his initial declaration: a sequence of images that build up *The Prophetic Book*. The "I" that grants the world is the "I" that grants the poem. The speaker is the poet, the wordmonger. Not surprisingly, already in the second stanza he turns away from the world of objects towards the world of names, words – to language itself:

You will need to know
the names of stone:
Tayton, Clipsham, Anstrude, Besace,
Headington, Wheatley, Perou,
and then Savonnières Courteraie
which is quarried at Meuse.

The variety of the world is celebrated here as is the extraordinary variety of the language which is used to describe the opulence of the world. The sequence of nine names of stone is like a collage of abstract forms – these words seem to get free from the objects they denote and exist in their own right, as phonic and visual signs. The names of stone quoted above are different labels of what is often taken (for granted) as one thing – the stone (notice the use of the Singular). The seemingly uniformed, undifferentiated phenomenon multiplies as the result of naming and of applying language.

⁹ John Carey on Craig Raine in: *Contemporary Writers*.

This particularly human activity of naming, so closely related to the poetic practice, soon reappears. The fifth stanza brings an even longer catalogue of names given to different kinds of sheep:

I will bring you the beauty of flocks:
 Southdown, Dalesbred, Dartmoor,
 Derbyshire, Gritstone, Bluefaced Leicester,
 Herdwick, Hill Radnor, Devon Longwool,
 Beulah Speckled-Face, Oxford Down,
 Welsh Mountain, North Country Cheviot,
 do not exhaust the names of our sheep.

These lines may recall the first act of naming after The Creation, when man, assisting God, gave names to all the animals. This naming continues: as previously, the effect is that of multiplication, a sudden explosion of variety, which earlier might have been thought to be under control and limited. The simple word "sheep" conveniently reduces the opulence of reality, masks the chaos of momentary revelations. It can be observed how often Raine makes use of individual names in his poems, or of words of specialized register, denoting small classes of objects, functioning nearly as proper names. It may be that the task of the poet today is to look for uniqueness – in his strife to talk about individual phenomena the poet paradoxically goes against the nature of the very medium he uses, language, which works according to the principle of generalization. Except for the extreme case of names (which denote only one object), words reflect the mechanism of classifying and categorizing, i.e. ordering. The poet's urge to observe uniqueness is at the same time a gesture disturbing the received order and a step towards chaos: an unstructured amalgam of distinct, unique objects.

The figure of the Shaman, although it appears only in the fourth part of the poem, is beside the Poet another central figure of *The Prophetic Book*. It determines the structure of the whole poem, which develops through seven stages – starting from birth (Part I), passing through the underworld areas of Sheol (Part II) and Limbo (Part III), reaching the momentary Paradise (Part V), only to fall back into the realm of Death in the part called *Chest of Drawers* (Part VI). It should be remembered that in all shamanic mythologies the motif of the journey, both to Hell and to Heaven, plays a fundamental role.

According to the beliefs of the Siberian tribes, where the idea of shamanism comes from, the Shaman is a mediator between the human world and the world of the spirits¹⁰. He can fulfil his function because of his ability to travel to and from the other world. The journey takes place

¹⁰ M. M. Kośko, *Mitologia ludów Syberii*, WAiF, Warszawa 1990, p. 25.

during the act of self-ecstasy, when the shaman beats his drum, and murmurs unintelligible, yet sacred words. The journey is often undertaken in order to retrieve the souls captured by evil spirits. If somebody falls ill or dies, it is understood as a clear sign that his soul has been captured. The shaman has the power to go to the realm of the spirits and to negotiate with them the return of the captive soul.

The shamanic power is granted to the chosen few by gods or spirits. In many Siberian myths the external sign of being chosen is some kind of physical defect¹¹. One can be initiated into the shamanic rites also by one's ancestors, former shamans. The process of becoming a shaman consists of several stages during which the soul of the future shaman is taken by evil spirits to the underworld, where he is beheaded and cut into pieces by the three haggard devils. His limbs are scattered all over the place, his brain is licked by evil spirits, his bones are broken. Then the devils collect the scattered bones and fragments of meat, strengthen them and join them again¹². The newly created body, which has come from the dead, acquires shamanic powers. The archetypal pattern of birth-through-death is recreated.

The shaman, whose role is to heal diseased bodies and possessed souls by maintaining personal contact with the world of the spirits, can perform his task only when he himself has been formerly subjected to the particular type of suffering. His power to help the troubled members of his community is gained in the course of his journey through pain, illness, death. In order to cure, the shaman himself has to be wounded, as the title of Joan Halifax's book suggests¹³. Eliade describing the shamanistic process speaks of "abreaction" and draws parallels between the shaman who relives the events and the patient during the psychoanalytical treatment who "intensively relives the initial situation from which his disturbance stems"¹⁴. Just as the patient confronted with the roots of his/her illness can overcome the problem, so can the shaman defeat someone's troubles by identifying himself with the suffering person.

The shaman from the central part of *The Prophetic Book* is the poet's father, to whom Raine had earlier devoted the prose section, *The Silver Plate*, from his third collection of poems *Rich*¹⁵. One can read here about his father's numerous occupations. In the course of the 1930s this extraordinary

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹² See: M. Eliade, *Initiation, rites, societies secretes*, Paris 1976 (fragments translated into Polish in "Pismo" 1988, nr 5, s. 64-70, also other texts by Eliade published in the same issue of "Pismo", p. 71-96). M. M. Koško, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

¹³ In *Notes on The Prophetic Book* the author mentions among other sources a book by J. Halifax, *Shaman. The Wounded Healer*.

¹⁴ See *Notes on The Prophetic Book*. The quotation comes from M. Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton 1974.

¹⁵ C. Raine, *Rich*, Faber and Faber, London 1984.

man managed to work as "a painter and decorator, plumber, electrician, publican and boxer"¹⁶, turning later – already during the poet's life – into a faith healer. In his autobiographical piece Raine writes about faith-healing seances which took place in their house after his father had been told by a visiting medium that he had a gift. Parallels between the shamanic figure and his father go beyond the power to heal which they were both believed to possess. Raine's father was "the wounded healer", as Joan Halifax says, "the healer with head wounds", as Raine puts it in the poem. Although the details remain unknown, Raine's father was invalided during the war by an explosion in a munitions factory. The accident had severe consequences: he had to be operated upon "to remove bits of shrapnel from his triple-fractured skull"¹⁷. Ever since he has suffered from epilepsy. In *The Silver Plate* Raine also recalls his father talking in his sleep: "My father often talks in his sleep and sometimes he speaks fluently in a foreign language. We used to think it must be Polish because two other patients in adjacent beds were Poles"¹⁸. The same scene is recreated in *The Prophetic Book*:

He had returned from the dead
with the gift of tongues:
he spoke to the dark
beyond the bedroom walls,
rapid as a Polish auctioneer [...]

Other details from the poet's childhood connected with his father give further reasons for the Shaman parallel. According to the stories that his father often told (and he was a perfect raconteur), he was semi-conscious during the brain surgery and "remembers the whirr and bite of the saw that took off the top of his skull. They removed part of his brain and inserted a silver plate"¹⁹. This account may bring to mind the process of shamanic initiation: "the evil spirits carry the future shaman's soul to the underworld [...] Here the shaman undergoes his initiation. The spirits cut off his head, which they set aside (for the candidate must watch his dismemberment with his own eyes)"²⁰. Raine's description of his father's fits echoes the accounts of the shamanic trance: "He spits with contempt and then begins to whimper suddenly and pick things off his body with a disgusted expression on his face. We think these must be bits of flesh"²¹.

The central section of *The Prophetic Book* consists of a series of reminiscences from Raine's boyhood. The figure of his father, taking the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44–45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁰ Eliade's account quoted in *Notes on the Prophetic Book*.

²¹ C. Raine, *Rich.*, p. 45.

form of the shaman, appears no sooner than in the second half of the section. The whole part records and recreates the journey into the poet's past "in search of myself", which leads to the father. Earlier, a different father appears, Father Watson. Seen at the moment of the poet's first communion (a version of an initiation rite), Father Watson proves to be an unwanted presence; associated with decay, illness, age. The speaker cannot accept him as his father ("I faltered on Father"), having suddenly realized the power and the true meaning of that word. The real father is discovered later, in the act of self-discovery. He comes in answer to the basic existential question, Who am I:

I am only my father,
the healer with head wounds,
who takes on pains in his sleep.

The total identification of the son with his father occurs in the last stanza where the speaker re-experiences his father's fit of epilepsy as if it were his own. This identification with the epileptic father (acting out a shamanic trance) also contains meanings other than the discovery of the son's self in his father's idiosyncrasies. If the father is a shaman, then the poet who becomes his father is **also a shaman**. The shamanic power, the gift, is passed on to the poet in the act of abreacting; the son relieves his father's illness by taking on his pains and by being struck by a fit of epilepsy. The son to whom shamanic powers are granted in Part IV is the father from the opening section who passes on to his yet unborn son the poetic gift of acceptance. The prophecy (future) of the first part of the poem is completed by the history (past) of Part IV.

The poet who sees himself as the shaman travels through different regions of the human condition. In the poem the spiritual world and the underworld visited by Siberian shamans in their journeys take on the form of various condition of human life – hope and expectations before the birth of the poet's son (Part I), the pain and agony experienced by a Birkenau survival (Part II), exile, alienation and disease in the biography of George Katkov (Part III), the search for identity in recalling scenes from Raine's childhood and memories of his parents (Part IV), love (Part V), and the death of Seamus Heaney's mother at Bellaghy (Part VI). The identification of the poet with the shaman implies that the meaning of poetry stems from the poet's ability to confront all aspects of life. The variety of the world as exemplified in the static catalogue of objects from Part I has its dynamic counterpart in the many-faceted phenomenon of life.

In the deep trance into which the shaman falls the difference between the internal and the external world disappears²². The journey to other

²² See: H. Christof, *Ścieżka szamana*, "Pismo" 1989, nr 6, p. 155–157.

regions of being is also a journey into one's own self, into one's past. The identification with the whole universe which takes place during the shamanic ecstasy, is possible since the shaman relieves the lives of other people. Hence the poet who acquired the shamanic gift can say "I am only my father". Hence in Part II he can adopt the persona of a Jewish survivor from a concentration camp and write her memories in first person narration.

The motif of the journey, derived here from the shamanic mythology, echoes another journey undertaken by one of the greatest poets of history, the father of poets, Dante, and recalls his attempt to compose another Prophetic Book. Dante's journey to the underworld, in which he was accompanied by Vergil, also had curative powers: they travelled through Hell in order to free Dante of the temptation to sin; while their journey to Purgatory was to purify his soul of even the capacity of error. Seeing **shamanism in terms of poetic creation**, as Raine does in his poem, is a decision that finds justification in Eliade's interpretation of shamanic ecstasy in his work *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*²³. Eliade draws attention to unintelligible sounds produced by the shaman in a trance and suggests that this "preecstatic euphoria is one of the universal sources of lyrical poetry"²⁴. The shaman who summons the spirits, beats his drum and imitates the language of animals falls into a state conducive to "dynamic linguistic creativity and the rhythms of lyrical poetry". The poet's journey into his own past during which he discovers his identity with the father, turns thus into a journey to the origins of poetry. The gift of tongues which his father possessed and passed over to his son, comes from the realm of the dead: it is both a gift from one's ancestors (echoing the gift from Part I) and a gift from the spirits, from those who belong to a different order of things.

In the state of ecstasy (cf. poetic fury) the shaman, like the poet, leaves the bonds of the physical world and exercises his liberty. This is a departure from a pre-established order which characterizes everyday life and a turn towards the formlessness – to the chaos of sacred, meaningless words and to the state where all things, high and low, external and internal, past and future coexist without any of the barriers that could separate them. It is in this sphere, in the sphere of chaos exemplified in the catalogues of Part I, that all the world is experienced as one, as sacred (i.e. important), just for the very reason that it is. In place of the categorized and classified world the poet introduces the flexible world of chaos where all things are equally important and can be linked – at will – with the most distant and seemingly alien objects. The idea of the oneness of the world (which

²³ M. Eliade, *Shamanism...*

²⁴ Quoted after: M. Eliade, *Szamanizm i kultura*, "Pismo" 1989, nr 6.

however cannot preclude its phenomenal variety) comes as a conclusion from Raine's poetic practice of "seeing likeness where no one has seen it previously"²⁵.

Chest of Drawers, the sixth part of *The Prophetic Book* recalls section I with its catalogue-like structure and a long list of Martian images which evoke the opulence of the surrounding world. The images are as striking as in the best fragments of Raine's poetry, delighting the reader with witty aperceptions: "The sea-horse saxophones", "The thalidomide seal" "this velvet dachshund's miniature Madame Récamier". This is a continuation of the world taken for granted and granted by the poet to his son in Part I. Raine said that *Chest of Drawers* is a "mirror image" of Part I, "an itemized account of the earth whose sum is death"²⁶. *Chest of Drawers* is dedicated to the memory of Seamus Heaney's mother – Bellaghy mentioned in the poem is the poet's birthplace. Death and birth meet here again, as they do several times in the whole poem (e.g. in *Sheol*). In the opening section the parent (father) was waiting for the birth of his child. Here it is the child who is expecting the death of a parent (his mother). The father from Part I is a poet, just as the child from Part VI is a poet: both of them are waiting for the two most critical moments in human life. The first points towards the future, the second towards the past. The "sample of life" in *Chest of Drawers* is not promised as it was at the beginning: now it comes "out of oblivion". The moment of death retrieves "these thousand things". With the end of the woman's life the whole world starts multiplying and increasing, only to disappear forever. The motionless eyes of the poet's mother, the life-giver, mean the end of the prophecy. The shaman's journey has reached its end, the book has been read, the poem is over.

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POSTAĆ POETY I SZAMANA W POEMACIE CRAIGA RAINE'A *KSIĘGA PROROCTW*

Craig Raine, współczesny poeta angielski, twórca tzw. szkoły Marsjan, opublikował w 1988 r. siedmioczęściowy poemat *Księga proroctw*, na który złożyły się utwory powstałe na przestrzeni kilku lat i prezentowane niezależnie w czasopiśmie literackich. Głównym motywem

²⁵ See note 9.

²⁶ Craig Raine on BBC Radio 3, 23 October 1989.

integrującym tych siedem wierszy jest motyw podróży poprzez różne stany ludzkiej egzystencji: przez nadzieję i rozpacz, cierpienie i miłość, narodziny i śmierć. Motyw podróży wywiedziony tu został z podań ludów syberyjskich, z mitologii szamańskiej. Szaman, jako pośrednik między światem ludzi a światem bogów i duchów, ma zdolność podróżowania między tymi sferami. Aby osiąść swe nadprzyrodzone, uzdrowicielskie zdolności, szaman musi doświadczyć bólu i cierpienia, chorób i śmierci. Podróż szamana ma miejsce w trakcie ekstatycznego transu, w którym szaman gra na bębnie, naśladuje głosy zwierząt i rozmawia z duchami tajemnym językiem. Mircea Eliade, którego prace stanowiły inspirację dla Raine'a, uważa szamańskie „kamłanie” za źródło poezji lirycznej, przez co jeszcze bardziej zbliża postać szamana do postaci poety.

W poemacie Raine'a szamanem jest ojciec poety, uzdrowiciel i epileptyk, któremu udało się umknąć śmierci. W środkowej części poematu poeta, niczym szaman, odbywając podróż w głąb siebie, odkrywa, że jest „tylko własnym ojcem”. Całkowicie się z nim utożsamiając, przejmuje ojcowskie upośledzenie, a wraz z nim „szamańską” moc – moc rozmawiania z duchami, władzę nad słowem i umiejętność podróżowania po różnych regionach ludzkiego losu.