

"DOMESTIC AND OTHER WORLDS: GERARD WOODWARD'S HOUSEHOLDER"

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The publication of Craig Raine's *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* heralded a new style of imagery and a new way of perceiving the ordinary, everyday world and its objects which rapidly became known as the "Martian" style of writing, generating many, though not always such talented, pages of verse in the same vein by others.

Raine's ability to reassess the world and his experiences of it by means of striking, sharp, often even apparently perversely obscure imagery has made its mark on contemporary English poetry. Raine is not, however, as one might suspect from the above, a mere linguistic conjurer with an eye for the elaborate simile or unconventional and teasing image. His imagery is rarely, if ever, just decorative, but serves the purpose of involving the reader directly in a reinvention of the world around him, in a reappraisal of life that moves between and lays before the reader the polarities, truths and paradoxes of human experience.

The strength and talent of Raine's voice has inevitably led to others apparently following the footsteps of the founder of the so-called "Martian" school. The tag "Martian" has been applied to several poets but, as is the case with labelling and cataloguing, it does not always sit comfortably on a particular writer's shoulders or suit his work. Christopher Reid, poetry editor of Faber and Faber, is an example of the dangers of literary labelling, particularly with regard to a writer's early work. While Reid admits to the influence of Raine's work upon his own, he finds the label annoying, saying recently: "I see as much similarity between our work and other people's who would not be associated with us".¹ Indeed for the discerning reader there may, perhaps, be more dissimilarity between these two poets than similarity when their work is exposed to in-depth analysis. Perhaps reviewers and critics are too quick to label a poet's early work, Reid's *Arcadia* and *Pea Soup* are a case in point, and I therefore found the term "Martian" troubling when it surfaced in Fleur Adcock's review of Gerard Woodward's first collection *Householder*, recently published by Chatto and Windus.² Adcock does, however, use the term carefully, referring the reader to influence rather than categorically labelling, concluding that Woodward's description of a breakfast table in the poem "The New World" "(...) could not have existed without Craig Raine".³

Woodward's first collection is a remarkable piece of work. Influences there are, and Raine is certainly evoked, but underpinning what Adcock rightly terms "(...)

1.- Jones, Nicolette; "Guardians of Parnassus", *The Sunday Times*, July 1991, p.6.7

2.- Adcock, Fleur; "Surface Tensions", *The Sunday Times*, July 1991, p.6.3

3.- Woodward, Gerard; *Householder*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1991, p. 52

the rich surface textures” lies a dark interface, a world fraught by tension between loss and repossession, between the real and the imagined, a world charged with dark emotional intensity. All of the poems in the collection seem to attempt to pin down that which escapes precise verbal definition: the silent areas of the subconscious. In almost every poem the familiar domestic and reliable world is charged by Woodward’s intense imagination to symbolise that “other” unreliable inner world fluctuating between the given and the lost, the dark and the light, as the poet’s voice seeks to rationalise and stabilise its flux. Even such an apparently simple piece as “Sink Song”, with its ingenious and engaging simile that makes of washing up a “newtown” of tower blocks harbours a darker threatening world and an overriding notion of loss:

I must however, dare
Place my hand
In the almost empty water

Knowing only knives are left,
Like a child’s hand
In a rockpool of crabs.

Their blades form final
Stiff bouquets, but I have lost
All my vases.

I mourn my crumpled
Finger prints. My nails, however,
Are never so white as now.⁴

The physical world Woodward describes is often a claustrophobic domestic one of rooms, gas fires, kitchens, pots and pans, furniture and fuse boxes serving as a springboard to assess that darker inner world, creating a sense of unease in the reader and producing what Fleur Adcock has so aptly described as “(...) an uncomfortable book” in which presences are counterpointed by absences, possession by loss, the real by the imagined.

As a first collection, *Householder* is a striking work, introducing the reader to a strong, dynamic voice if somewhat restricted in its preoccupations. The precision of Woodward’s eye, the subtlety of his similes and his controlled handling of language and emotion, signal the arrival of a very promising voice to the world of English poetry. One looks forward to a widening of thematic concerns and the consolidation of what should prove to be a highly individual voice in future collections.

4.- Woodward, Gerard; Op. Cit. p. 33