

# Modern poetry

Richard Price, *Lucky Day*,  
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Lyric poetry is the art of self-perceiving speech. Whatever phenomena a lyric poem perceives in the external world – the small rain, a summer’s day, a red wheelbarrow – its primary perception is of itself, as a voice feeling its way through the fact of versification.

There is a modern misconception, however, that lyricism is primarily perception of externals, subsequently versified. The Imagism of Ezra Pound is still misunderstood in this respect. Pound’s 1913 poem “In a Station at the Metro” (“The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.”) is often quoted as an example of how important the surprising comparison is to the modern poet. But the bleary conceit that in some way faces in a crowd resemble petals on a bough – the visual image – is really the least important element of that lyric; it is only the occasion to present the

emotional image of a speaker discovering, in speech, the total momentary insight – “*these faces*” – as significant. The poem does not present a verifiable simile, but a voiced, unparaphrasable apprehension. It does not mistake the original connection alone for the modern emotion.

Informationism, the Scottish poetry movement of which Richard Price was part in the early 1990s, did at times make this mistake in its desire to discover a notionally modern poetics. Take, for example, the similes of Robert Crawford’s “Scotland” – “Optoelectronics of hay” – or Price’s own “An informationist’s kitchen” (1994): “Stacked like DATs / there are flapjacks with millennial dates”. In these poems the technologised world is noticed from an ironic pastoral or domestic distance. In Price’s kitchen, awareness of the abstract science of data storage has an ironically concretising effect: the dimensions of a flapjack do resemble a Digital Audio Tape cassette, while the sound-pattern of “stacked”, “DATs”, and “-jacks” adds an audible crunch to the image. The sound effects, though, are just that – enhancements of a prose witticism, uncoordinated by feeling. The lines play with the sights and sounds of the information era, but with little sense of themselves as feeling speech formed by its conditions.

That was eleven years ago. Reflecting on the poem recently, Price has written that the style of “An informationist’s kitchen” might be read as a “parody” of a magazine article describing modern domestic space. In the best poems of *Lucky Day* – a gathering of several small collections and sequences written since – he achieves a more sophisticated lyricism of the information age. Like the later poetry of Craig Raine – whose early “Martianism” clearly informs the perceptive estrangements of the Informationist poems quoted above – *Lucky Day* develops a sparer, finer sense of hesitation and repetition as effective lyric devices in themselves. This upgraded, broken-down Informationism apprehends that there is no valid parodic distance between lyrical speech and functional English; it discovers in the language and condition of information the language and condition of emotion.

Price’s nimble similes are still in evidence – “On the stereo / a single’s black coffee / twirls its central cream” – but they are not a stylistic staple. Instead, the facts of modern life are selectively arranged to reveal their own strangeness – as in this image from *Hand Held*, a sequence about a daughter with severe learning difficulties: “in the Inn at the Zoo / ... / ...the gargling / electronic cockatoo / in the rafters / above the ketchup”. The structural concomitant of the witty simile, a kind of rational riddling about the occasion of a poem, can still upset the lyric balance though, punch-lining otherwise open-ended arrangements of images with meaningful nudges: “like a love-letter // we fold the bed-cover”.

All good lyric poetry, from A.E. Housman to J. H. Prynne, is obscure

(intellectual content is another question), because the self-perceiving speech of lyric is only interested in the elaboration of an emotion, not its occasion. The opening section of *Lucky Day* – “Scape” – goes successfully further in trusting to the lyric sufficiency of such obscurity. Several poems recall the spare found-speech-and-object arrangements of the American Language poet Rae Armantrout, in which the lyric emotion is patterned across the scattered parts of the whole. The reader is given emotional information, not analysis. The most exemplary new Informationist lyric collected here, though, comes in the later section, *A News*. “Softened, bright” first appeared in *Poetry Review* in Spring 2003; since then, Price has subtly revised it for even greater concision:

Computer light improves any painting,  
back-lit for a radiant show.  
Vermeer’s balance, even,  
glistenises, remains in its glisten.

The casual folds – those drapes –  
stay, too, but know fabric now  
as memories can think they know  
what was best, what was  
likely true.

Back-lit for a virtual exhibition:  
I haven’t a single picture of you  
(days that did know what a day was),  
can’t now.

Softened, bright.  
It’s so good to have the,  
to have the technology.

Every line of “Softened, bright” is self-perceiving, lyrical speech; an occasion may easily be inferred around the poem (speaker views Vermeer’s “Woman Holding a Balance” on the Internet, recalls old flame) but the poem itself only speaks of immediate perceptions: the visual clarity of digitised technology, the nature of memories. The colloquial musical awkwardness of the vocabulary (“glistenise”), grammar (“what was / likely true”), rhyme and repetition is a far lyric cry from flapjacks-stacked-like-DATs, but a much truer and more touching account of connection and disconnection in the age of modems.

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