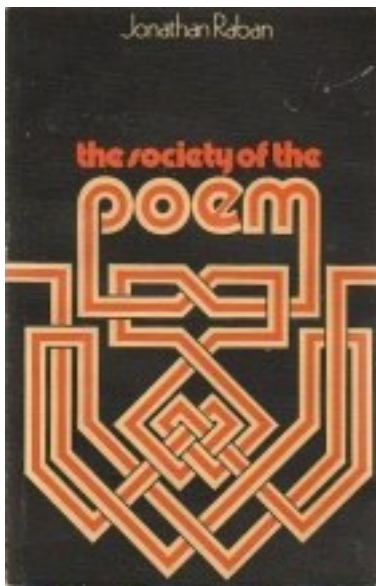


The society of the poem



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著者:Jonathan Raban

出版者:Harrap

出版时间:1971

装帧:Paperback

isbn:9780245508004

It's got to stop! more than 20 books have come into my library this month, about half acquired during a short stay in Hay on Wye last week. Among them: Jonathan Raban, *The Society of the Poem* (Harrap, 1971) (£3.50 in the Cinema). This is a really enjoyable and interesting read: Raban was clearly deeply engaged in all the poetry of the moment and provides a selective, organised, appreciative but always sharply critical survey of all aspects. The range of his attention is remarkable by today's standards: he is able to understand 'The Whitsun Weddings' and 'The North Atlantic Turbine' as epochal works (as well as to see their self-exhausting limits).

He responds to Olson's 'typographical imagination ... always visually subtle and satisfying' (p. 77); and in the chapter 'Words Alone' (pp. 95-111) he discusses concrete poetry, locating its rationale and force in a reaction – alongside other poetic modes of minimalism, parataxis and cut-up/collage – against socio-linguistic alienation. He finds

it at times both childish (in good and bad ways) and Puritanical, and views its strategies as a type of realism, often seeming merely to resemble the fragmentary messages it wants freedom from. He proposes that 'it operates most satisfactorily as a wing of literary criticism' (p. 109).

Other themes around which chapters are loosely organised are language; form; 'the politics of poetic structure', with a rather penetrating aperçu (I thought) that 'just as the centre has congealed in Anglo-American culture, so the right and the left have moved farther apart, defining themselves not against each other but against the consensus in the middle' (p. 74); tradition; 'voice' and dramatic monologue; place. A penultimate chapter considers three recently published collections -- Crow, Lowell's Notebook, and one by Charles Tomlinson. Raban finds the Lowell to be the nearest thing to a 'masterpiece' published in the previous few decades. (He went on not only to edit a Lowell Selected (1974) – which H., with his usual amazing nose, spotted for me a couple of days ago in the secondhand bookshop at Putney Bridge – but also, according to Wikipedia, to become Lowell's lodger.)

Despite some clear hints earlier ('The house of poetry has been split up into flats', p. 61) – Raban's grasp of the field made it seem as though a happier and more vigorous poetic plurality pertained in 1970 than does today. However his final chapter describes 'an atmosphere thick in plots and delusions' (p. 173), and though there are some significant differences (too complex for me to regale now) it's clear that some new dissociation of sensibility had already happened – this long before the so-called 'Poetry Wars'. Or do we just always require a golden-age pre-Babel fantasy as dialectical motivation?

In the end the restless Raban settles slightly disappointingly on a conservative analysis:

'what we need now, much more than the most daring experiment in anti-language and post-poetry, is a vocabulary for discriminating seriously between some poems and others; a language of preference and value' (p. 183). Anyway what is great about this book is not this conclusion but the vivid reminder of what was going on in poetry in Britain 40 years ago; how much that is still important, and how some basic issues still pertain.

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