Three Poems from *Suffolk Bang*

ADAM WARNE

With Passengers

a strange distemper

are near me when

robin is saddest

then ejected through

a section of smoke

to afford some

mother, mawther

native of Bildeston

infested with lice

ran up and down

but for my love

pig got well directly

Adam Warne is a poet and creative writing research student at the University of Roehampton. He is currently researching the close relationship between fools and madness by failing to accurately re-create Will Kemp's morris dance from London to Norwich. He has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia. His poems have been published in various places including *The Rialto*, *Lighthouse*, *And Other Poems* and *Zarf*.

Broadside

all made of copper

King and Country

in their khaki

by the river

this gun cotton

been known to kill

us boys had to

very strictly

because of sparks

alas, got the sack

doing acrobatics

General Survey

more hurtful in this

another hungry at

the rents were high

and all was well

grown over with

ivy and yellow

has fractured their arm

themselves by spinning

anger out of hot

in great abundance

wielding the thunder

In my sequence *Suffolk Bang,* from which these three poems are taken, I wanted to explore the working class history of rural Suffolk. I drew on the oral history collected by George Ewart Evans in *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (1956) and *The Pattern Under the Plough* (1966), Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* (1969), and resources from my own family including the short autobiography written for family members by my great-grandfather Leonard Gooding and conversations with my great-uncle Roy Miles. These sources describe a world of large families in small cottages; low pay for labouring on farms that were becoming increasingly mechanised or in one of the few factories; getting drinking-water from a pond in the garden; poaching rabbits with a lurcher and spade whilst being careful to avoid the gamekeeper.

I was also interested in the folklore and witchcraft connected to the history of Suffolk. Matthew Hopkins, the Witchfinder General, toured Suffolk during the Civil War, being paid by local authorities to accuse, try, and hang women and men. "Hopkins picked upon the most vulnerable members of society", particularly those who were poor and in receipt of parish relief (Wright and Wright 32). As Pip and Joy Wright (2004) have shown, belief in witchcraft continued in Suffolk well into the nineteenth century. There was also belief in the magical powers of objects, such as the belief that "a flint with a hole in it has the peculiar quality of warding off evil influences" (Evans *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* 206). Accusations of witchcraft were an abuse of power, but there was also the hope that magic could be used to protect against malevolent powers.

"For as long as social relations are skewed, who speaks in poetry can never be a neutral matter" (Bernstein 5). Speaking can be a form of power and a challenge to power. Likewise, refusing to communicate can be both. Ronald Blythe claims that Suffolk villagers "are not loquacious people" and those who had lived through the agricultural depression of the latter part of nineteenth-century and the trauma of the First World War developed a protective reticence caused by shaken self-confidence (17) . Whatever the cause, this reticence to communicate can be seen as a defence against the power of others, a refusal to be drawn vulnerably into a language skewed by social relations.

I have attempted to create poems that refuse to fully communicate. If as Denise Levertov argues "content determines form, and yet that content is discovered only *in* form", then form also discovers what is excluded, what is left out (Herbert and Hollis 102). I wanted to develop a form that foregrounded exclusion and reticence. Take for example the first three lines of 'With Passengers':

> a strange distemper
> are near me when
> robin is saddest

Lines two and three make sense together, though perhaps missing a definite article before 'robin', but there would appear to be something missing between the first and second line, words that when added would allow the grammar to make sense. There is no way of accurately guessing what is missing, no code that will fill in the gap. The exclusion cannot be made to disappear but forms a crucial part of the structure of the poem. But instead of a substance full of holes the form of the poem is hard. The first two lines are held firmly together by a similar length and similarities in sound, the repetition of *m* and *n* sounds, the half-rhyme between *temp* and *when*. This process is analogous to the making of Suffolk Bang, a very hard cheese which was made from milk that had been skimmed several times. Words have been skimmed, in the sense of removed, from the poems. Evans quotes a rhyming description of the cheese that echoes the protective reticence of the Suffolk villager:

> Those that made me were uncivil,
> For they made me harder than the devil:
> Knives won't cut me; fire won't sweat me;
> Dogs bark at me, but can't eat me. (Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay 69)

My use of form, particularly the ways in which absent connections and details are impossible to resolve, draws on the tradition of what Marjorie Perloff calls the poetics of indeterminacy, a tradition which includes Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. Particularly influential to my poems is John Ashbery's collection *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), a collection in which "disclosure is so totally blocked that the reader is all but excluded from the world of the text" (Perloff 267-268). This can be seen in Ashbery's poem 'Europe', a collage of III sections which uses extracts from the novel *Beryl of the Biplane* (1917) by William Le Queux. The extracts from the novel give an expectation that the poem might cohere, but Ashbery's techniques of juxtaposing small sections and breaking conventional syntax prevent any final coherence. A quotation of three sections is enough to give a sense of how this works:

54.

'He is probably one of the gang.'

55.

mood seems the sort
to brag
end

56.

songs like
You come back to me
you were wrong about the gravestone
that nettles hide quietly
The son is not ours. (Ashbery 102)

'Europe' resists any easy interpretation, but instead offers unusual conjunctions and unexpected connections that defamiliarize language. "Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary" (Butler 145). As in Ashbery's poem, the resistance to interpretation in my *Suffolk Bang* poems fights against ordinary meaning. This suggests that the absences in a poem, the places where words are missing or that fail to conform to expected grammar and syntax, might be able to challenge the power structures that have become sedimented in and as the ordinary. Though in relation to my poems that is perhaps as hopeful as keeping a special flint to ward off evil.

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