

The wrong kind of Raine

The publicity for the Vorticism show at Tate Britain got off to an unfortunate start when the *Guardian* published a crude and ill-informed preview by Craig Raine on 28 May, 2010.

Under an incomprehensible title, “Vorticism: the biz of the buzz”, Raine launches a facetious account of Vorticism that nobody with a knowledge of the movement would recognise.

Craig Raine is a poet, and edits the magazine *Areté* from Oxford, where he used to teach at New College. He is a great favourite of the *Guardian* and *Observer* literary reviews, and *Areté* belongs to the same literary world. Raine does lively and self-regarding writing:

Who were the Vorticists? Galvanic Ezra Pound was the band’s vocalist, belting it out.

With his ziggurat hair, he was the impresario, the excitationist, the amplificationist, just as another writer, Marinetti, was the focal point of the Italian Futurists.

This is ridiculous, anachronistic, and inaccurate. Ezra Pound did not found Vorticism, in the way that Marinetti founded Futurism in 1909. Raine shows his ignorance when he asserts that “The philosopher T.E. Hulme was its [Vorticism’s] theorist.” Hulme wrote about contemporary art – mostly on Epstein – but he had no link with Vorticism. He is not in *Blast*, did not publicise it, and wrote no Vorticist manifesto.

Raine has a string of errors. He thinks that C.R.W. Nevinson was called “Christopher”; he was called Richard. Raine can’t spell “Brzeska” consistently, and seems to think that this was Henri Gaudier’s actual name, rather than an addition to it to recognise the woman he lived with. He refers to “Brzeska’s *Fish...*” Then he ignorantly adds an exclamation mark to the title of the well-known *Blast*, which according to him has a “Bless!” section. Raine says that Brancusi’s phallic *Princess X* “was impounded for obscenity in New York in 1920”. It wasn’t: *Princess X* was removed from the Salon des Indépendants in Paris in 1920; Raine is muddling this with the 1926 dispute with New York customs over a separate work, *Bird in Space*.

Raine thinks that Vorticism had to do with machinery, a view that died decades ago. As so often, he overstates out of ignorance: “The machine is central to Vorticism. Everything was subsumed to the machine”. This means that the major Vorticist work has to be Epstein’s *Rock Drill* – and nothing else. Raine likes Gaudier’s *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*. That, unfortunately, has nothing of the machine about it. He can like these two sculptures because he has dismissed the entirety of Vorticist painting in two sentences. Apart from William Roberts (what?), “none of these slight painters is touched with talent: they are cannon fodder. They are the infantry, the grunts, bulking agent, the barium meal which creates the sense of a movement”. There are distinctions to be made between Wadsworth, Nevinson, Saunders, Dismorr, Etchells and Dorothy Shakespear. But Craig Raine’s mind is unacquainted with subtlety. With him, either you are a genius, or you do not exist.

This presumably accounts for the strange contrast he sets up between Gaudier and the sculptor Constantin Brâncuși. It’s a contest that Gaudier could never win. Brâncuși (1876-1957) lived to be 81, and was born fifteen years before Gaudier, who himself died in 1915 at the age of 23. *Of course* Brâncuși was “better” than Gaudier. Why not then give some attention to Gaudier himself, in his time, and as he really was? But in that case Raine wouldn’t have the chance to show off what he knows about the great Romanian artist. And that would never do.

As to Wyndham Lewis, Raine doesn’t have the courage to take him on as an artist. Rather than discuss the work, he tries to dismiss the theory behind it – and picks on one of Lewis’s most provocative and interesting ideas, that someone living in the city will have “a different habit of vision” to someone “living amongst the lines of a landscape”. Such an idea, he tells us, has been “definitively mocked” by Virginia Woolf, and is therefore worthless. Prose style (are we talking about prose style here?) is not in any way affected by environment, according to this “definitive” view of the author of *Orlando*. In a moment, two

centuries of liberal and left-wing thought about social context and the world we live in comes crashing down. For Raine, Lewis's idea is "glib" and "falling for a formula". Forgive me for thinking it is rather brilliant, somewhat suggestive, and worth thinking about.

There is much more to object to in Raine's manic article – for example, that because Hans Arp and El Lissitzky don't mention Vorticism in a book of artistic –isms, this means that Vorticism barely existed and was "effectively invisible". Not in Britain it wasn't. Of interest is a curious insistence on near-perverse sexuality in Raine's remarks. A photograph shows "cubist folds in Lewis's ample crotch". To the reader of a sex manual "the warm living woman will come as a complete surprise". Epstein's *Rock Drill* has "a trim little bum", a recognition which will be less surprising to those who know that in 1984 Raine published a poem entitled "Arsehole". This vulgarity about art, this incomprehension about achievement, this dogged misrecognition of the object in front of him, is consistent with the failure of sensibility that is apparent in Raine's own poetry. In a review of his most recent book in the *Times Literary Supplement* (20 May 2011) we are told that, writing about his mother on her deathbed, he describes her request to have hairs taken from her face in the following couplet: "Every time a hair was plucked, / she sighed, almost like someone being slowly fucked". Those disgusting lines come from the same sensibility which wrote this review. For Raine, art means "look at me".

It is difficult to see how proper intellectual debate can take place in this country when writing of this kind is published, apparently without any sense that it is worthless. Raine's piece is available on the *Guardian* website, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/may/28/vorticists-tate-britain-exhibition-review> These pages are edited by Claire Armitstead, who is also books editor of both the *Guardian* and the *Observer*: surely a tribute to a great talent. Can she be pleased to publish

this piece of writing permanently on the internet? Does it contribute to our understanding, or to an informed discussion? Let's hope she would have the courage to say that it does not.

Alan Munton