

## University of Cape Town

### PQR Anderson

#### Earmarks: Fragments from the notebooks

##### Abstract:

That a poet needs to be a mathematician, absorbed in the quantity and quality of sounds, the platonic properties behind their actual electronic spin, their chemical behaviours – and by that absorption to absorb these elements, this mathematics. This *ability* we recognise differently, and call it ‘ear’, which every poet must have. Some, as with musicians, are born with it – perfect pitch; most must learn it by singing in the choir, by taking their note from the tradition, the music they make themselves among.

##### Biographical note:

PQR Anderson is the author of two volumes of poetry, *Litany Bird* and *Foundling’s Island*, and editor of the anthology *In the Country of the Heart* (South African love poetry). Most recently, he was the runner-up in the 2016 University of Canberra’s Vice-Chancellor’s International Poetry Prize. He lectures in English Literature at the University of Cape Town.

##### Keywords:

Fragments – Form – Poetry – Journal – Diary

The sublime has been through the wringer – not that we much remember what a wringer was, or the sublime, for that matter, though they share a moment, perhaps in interesting ways. Is the sublime as obsolete as the wringer? And is the metaphorical wringer, as I use it here to mean philosophy, or a philosophy of aesthetics, or ‘theory’ (to use the word for that industry of late continental idealism, awkwardly inflected with Marx) – is *that* wringer perhaps obsolete as well?

It is Good Friday, with the still-appalled quiet of a Good Friday holiday, and from the car I look out at a raft of cloud to the north-west. It is a dark blue-grey beneath, a signature of the shadow it casts upon the water of the bay, but brilliant white above, which I can see at the edges and from the few clouds floating detached above it. We know that brilliance in the cloudshine an aircraft passes through and above. It, too, has a biblical resonance, because we find in it what correlative we can for the light of the transfiguration – surely Christ and the others stood in this sort of cloud on the top of the mountain, *in two days at once*, just as we have taken off in a winter storm and found ourselves, in ten minutes, in summer, above the cloud, in the shine of light rebounding, the ‘blink’?

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The starlings at exactly sunset in an armada of several hundred manoeuvring – the flock pregnant, its will as the child moving within it – high over the spring. In the deepening blue crossing and re-crossing the bitten disk of the moon, back and forth, at low speed, stacked, as further flights and squadrons collect to it out of all quarters. Occasional birds, miscued, begin to fall and then pull back into the drill of the flock – and then, as if punctured below, the whole bladder of birds seeps down, haemorrhaging in ones, twos, threes, and then a sudden all. The birds are more than falling out, they actually fly straight down, into the reeds, pelt down, with only the slightest lateral drag, like rain, leaves, bricks, what?

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[Of X], applying, strangely for a Lutheran, to the Loyolan formula for discernment. Drawn, yes – by the high adventure of it, as to an exotic destination (true, as it turned out), by the wild possibility of living two lives at once, a life of clay and a life of light. And that much he would have owned even then, if in different terms, different language. But now he would own differently, to being driven more than drawn. Driven by doubts. But that those doubts, several and scruffy, bother him now far less than they did then, even while he did all in his power to rip them out like a weed, not to know them. Small and scruffy, yes, a nuisance of doubts, and a weed, low and sprawling like the *duiweltjie* thorn, tenacious, the roots snapping so that you could never get at them, never root them out.

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There is a kind of fountain contrived in the wall between the *lavandario* and a private residence on the corner of Via Manzo and Via della Chiesa. It dispenses *l’aqua frizzante* at the deposit of the appropriate Euros; you bring your own vessel.

This bastard of Rome's splashing basins and a fast-food soda fountain, most resembling a *bancomat* in size, shape and operation, always disquiets me. It is of one piece with those many things once held in common and now somehow possessed and sold back to us, who, if we thought at all – if we only knew it – have lost in them a natural right.

We pay now for landscapes, places to sleep and places to shit, and the police will know us if we don't. Always, we are told, there is a value added: the upkeep of a pleasant space, a clean and flushing lavatory, a bolted door, a bubble in the water. But what we pay exceeds our need in every case. There is a profit, which is to say an inequity. This is as true of places to live, or swim, or even to be buried. Of it all, we are vouchsafed a better life – or death – more fizz in our existence.

Best of all – though we never think it through – we find the water tastes better costing more. This is the champagne of water, we feel, fit for a king, a water in which to culture pearls. Perhaps we even feel that in paying for something so obvious, so obviously free, we have mastered it. Taking control of nature in this way, by magical contract, we come into self-possession, control over our own lives, over which we have so little. The golden Euro, the alchemist's stone.

I stand at the contrivance, this secret in the wall, and I am invited to cry *Open Sesame!* I stand here as with Aaron's rod, invited to strike the stone.

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That a poet needs to be a mathematician, absorbed in the quantity and quality of sounds, the platonic properties behind their actual electronic spin, their chemical behaviours – and by that absorption to absorb these elements, this mathematics. This *ability* we recognise differently, and call it 'ear', which every poet must have. Some, as with musicians, are born with it – perfect pitch – most must learn it by singing in the choir, by taking their note from the tradition, the music they make themselves among.

Dr Johnson on Horace: 'So much of the excellence is in the numbers'.

*perfect pitch*

*studied ear*

Larkin

Eliot

Dylan Thomas

Pound

Shakespeare

Wordsworth

Keith Douglas

Coleridge

Keats

Plath

Campion

Dickinson

Thomas, Douglas, Keats show how the 'child' prodigy always has this perfect pitch.

Dr Johnson on Horace, how he always ‘returned to the anvil’.

Auden puzzles me.

It follows from the kind of list above that perfect pitch no more makes you a better poet than it necessarily makes you a superb musician; in fact, it may be that the hard *work* of the accomplished ear (as opposed to the born one) may empower it in a different way. What is more, the imperfect ear is also always able to hear ‘wrong’ and to err creatively. It is not tyrannised by its talent. (You have to leave Shakespeare out of all these things.) Thus (by and large) the bravura conservatism of the left-hand column, the pioneering radicalism of the right-hand one. As Auden said of Eliot, you can’t fault him on his metric. That means he learned it well enough to lose it, use it. With Larkin you’d never raise the point. And Larkin never puts a single word wrong; Eliot does. It’s the scientist in Coleridge that makes him a greater genius than Wordsworth; more capable of the radically new. His ear was *wronger*. The force of his intellect in driving the music is felt as intellect in the poetry too.

Auden puzzles me. I suspect he did have perfect pitch, but also so prodigious a mind that he overrode, *overwrote*, his ear with a science of it. That strange scientism is what so characterises the strange music of his early poems, which sound lovely, mean strangely, and everywhere have that clinical character – cold, remote, refusing, menacing. The question is: are they a violin played by a surgeon in an operating theatre, or a scalpel wielded by a violinist in a concert hall?

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I wish I could write about Sister Mawela who hid the small change in the thatch of the chapel, or barefooted kitchens smelling of sugar beans, mangos, the sour oil of atchar. The way the revolution happened half-asleep on winter mornings warmed like a python (like the one in the dormitory), crows stalling in a white sky.

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It is perilous to concede wholly to irony, or to reprove it, because irony cannot be encompassed. You should not let it encompass you (camp?) or try to encompass it – in the first case ‘you’ will be lost, in the second ‘it’ will be.

You may explain a joke (all jokes are irony), but you cannot altogether, for to explain a joke is always to explain it away. What you can tell if it is its content, but its defining form (itself informed by context) has vanished. And irony is always a formal matter, of a split significance, a constructed ambiguity (or a found one, constructed in retrospect). An explained joke can be understood, but it cannot be funny as the joke was; that is, it no longer works, and has been wholly altered – out of existence.

Sodium: the valent joke. Chlorine: the eager reason. Sodium chloride: the explained joke.

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That the world has lost the latitude of irony – irony that undermines the tyranny of partisan obsessions, that is antipathetic to zealotry, that opens doors, sponsors tolerance, builds the broad-church in everything. The ossified politics, and the ossified political discourse, of hard and ‘certain’ causes: a narrowing of the social artery, of the arteries of the polity.

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Which is not contrarily:

Irony discerns and chastens untruth better than anything, but can never tell or prove a truth on its own.

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Fireworks: the polypular plosive fires of the Roman Candles, each one higher than the last, like onion flowers. The flames *wet* in character. Between each ascent the trail of smoke muddled with the retinal shadow of the spent fire, so that we see two times at once; and the colour of the fireworks themselves precisely the colour of retinal after-lights, entoptic stains and blooms.

The universal language of spectators: gasps and ahs, swooning, half-sleepy, a lullaby of pleasure and assent.

And my favourite, Catherine Wheels: a holy concentricity of fire, *frrrtthhing*, each overtaking itself in ocular instantaneity, a heart of light. Wanting to wear one as a badge.

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Arriving last night in thick cloud, visibility down to 5 metres, drizzle wrung out of the cloud as if by the clouds own pressure, an internal gravity – and then the cloud clearing during the middle-night to leave a sky of raked ashes, stars there fanned to a blaze in the yet-wet air, and towards dawn a long sliver of cloud lying down in the valley below, lit by starlight, as were the ridges, and the stars themselves in a silent headlong dive – into the valley, and into the west into which the valley flows, and in disarray, being the late stars, and I arrived to an unknown place, as a passenger, as if blindfolded.

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The loves whose break-up destroys us are, in fact, those loves which themselves would destroy us.

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To the Waterberg. Up the R511 through the backyard of South Africa, two-storey towns, Blubul Liquors, El Shadai Gifts, Herbi’s Pizza. ‘Thabazimbi Mine Vouchers Accepted’. The iron mountain of Thabazimbi is all mined. To the west of the R511 it has become a slag-heap, a fine scree of ferrous gravel, dead blackish, with a few clumps of grass beginning to fix it. To the east it is ribboned in traversing red tracks, lorries hurtling down. Something out of Dante. I see that the conveyor belt crossing over the road from one mountain to the other is moving, and by some contrivance moving red rubble somewhere.

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There is a marked three-way distinction of ecotone: the intrusive thornveld on the low flats, bushveld on flats and in gulleys (a valley type; in truth the termitarial silver-clusterleaf is on the flats as well, very pretty, bosky grey-green) and various, and then the grassveld with proteacea and other shrub-trees, rising up and above the vast Lego of the cliffs. Those uplands, sweet and slake-green, blueish, into which one crosses so suddenly. Ascending into them as into a dream, and as into heaven, a slower, cleaner place of stone and grass and run-off water, swept by swallows and martins, cooled by the perpetual shade of cliffs. Today, surfacing in them under an endless massif of red stone, great lumps and knuckles and domes of mountain, two or three eland canter off the road into a herd of twelve, then of thirty, then fifty – all the eland in the world, the cows of heaven, milling nervous in their own irreproachable, encroached, spectral upland. Overhead, the ziggurats of stone, the flue of vultures in their hundreds. And chats and radio masts. And what is missing, the deserted iron-age sites, the sound of axes, the remote and secret smelters.

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So-and-so's seminar. Someone out of whatever woodwork sits with his clasped hands prayerfully to his lips, a rusky beard. Another has her jacket about her shoulders. The sash windows thump in the cold south-easter. Nothing engages me; it is all names. And X with pencils in her hair, an affectation she has developed since she began to teach.

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This morning a tiny mouse trapped on the smooth floor of the bath, its whole thumb-sized body beating with its pulse. And fringing the base of the whole bath, as high as it could (not) climb in every direction, a filigree of fresh blood, a thousand-thousand of the finest foot-strokes, each the thickness of the toe of a mouse. Something exquisite to behold, and profoundly distressing. My thought was immediately of how the colour of its fresh blood was exactly my own. I put the mouse, still very alive, out into the wet grass of the yard, but have feared for it all day.

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Running, yesterday, out towards Otterhampton, feeling the glucose packed in my thighs. Having to leap a dead herring-gull and a dead wood-pigeon along the way. No flies on the gull, flies on the pigeon. Heading into lethal traffic where the verge ran out. To Combrich, where Coleridge and Southey came into this part, after walking down through the Mendips.

And back again.

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A revolving cement-mixer, the small site-sized kind, at the end of the road, turning unattended. It sets me consciously thinking of the pleasure this machine gave me in early childhood, and with that deliberate thought a sudden, penetrating sense, both physical and emotional, of that pleasure, as memory recovered and extended into the present. A scent of wet cement, the trove of building sites, nails, sand heaps. And all the while, consciously admitting the object as archetype. thinking: revolution, transmutation, construction. poetry. A machine to keep stone from setting.