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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Matter by Bin Ramke

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Bin Ramke. *Matter*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004. 87 pp. \$16

What would it take, after a century of anti-humanism, to write a humanistic poetry that was both credible and rigorous? Bin Ramke's answer to this question is *Matter*, his eighth book of poems, in which he defies the conventions of both the traditional lyric and its antagonists. In place of a hubristic poetic vision or an already shopworn attempt at critique, Ramke offers his readers a secular inquiry that resists its own charm and a skepticism that refuses to spare the poet's own work. Reading Ramke can be an unsettling experience; his work is familiar in the sense that it is often grammatical and discursive, and employs both original narrative and borrowed language. But beneath this veneer, the unfamiliar lurks, in the form of a relentless abstraction that sets the course, and, frequently enough, the final destination, for the poems.

The first section of *Matter* illustrates this in a beguiling prose poem, "Where the Famous Wish They Had Lived." The poem's sections are named after historical figures—Parmenides of Elea, Sigmund Freud, and Emil Kraepelin—and take the form of intimate, occasionally poignant, monologues. Its central problem is that of knowledge and its limitations. Kraepelin, founder of clinical psychology and enemy of Freudian psychoanalysis, here waxes rhapsodic on his frustrated dreams in the poem's most lyrical passage:

In dream I was a child—*childhood* is our myth of psychiatry, but children continue to live in dream—being chased across a landscape. I was not afraid—there is no fear in such a landscape—but I did hurry. I would live there where there are no shadowy mountains, where rivers are slender gleams and cold, where the grasses vastly sound through the evening, sounding of air known as wind, felt—but there was a barrier, a glass wall under which a child's body might fit, but not his head. There is no child in this world but in the world of dream I want to live there, there on the other side. I want to live in someone else's dream, any healthy child's. I will live in any body.

In this passage, clinical psychology emerges as a combination of critical intelligence—"childhood is our myth of psychiatry"—and simple wish fulfillment—"There is no child in this world but in the world of dream I want to live there, there on the other side." The doubts and desires that bedevil these otherwise committed determinists push them toward the same basic realization: that our own fragile, decaying bodies undermine our claims to certainty and self-knowledge. To the extent that the poem laments the inexactitude of our most rarified critical discourses (psychoanalysis, for example) "Where the Famous Wish They Had Lived" sets an elegiac tone

for *Matter* as a whole. But it also hints at more optimistic possibility: one in which the hermeneutics of suspicion do not provide a definitive exit from our self-incurred immaturity, but rather create suggestive blind spots out of their own doggedness. In those penumbras the poems of *Matter* ask fundamental questions of desire, necessity, and truth.

A few privileged locales serve as sites of this search. The view from childhood is prominent among them. Others include mirrors, colors, sight, chemistry, and etymology. The poet treats each of these categories as a chance to unfold materiality itself without reducing it to its component parts: children indulge their imaginations; mirrors reproduce accurate, if inverse, copies of objects; colors only make sense through comparison; sight depends on vantage point and velocity; chemistry breaks and recreates the bonds that unite molecules; etymology gives us the manifold sources and uses for individual words. Ramke often weaves these subjects together, as in “The Greek for *Touch* also Meant *Kindle*” which traces *Eros* back to the struggle between the subject of the gaze and its putative object:

You must have noticed that curve, that jointure of neck
to shoulder, less gaudy than some angles and bends of the
body, a subtlety verging on arrogance especially when
a gleam, light—sun or candle—touched just as she turned
her head to catch you looking, to catch, like an angler
who misses the fish’s mouth and instead catches your eye.
Epicurus said there is matter and there is void: matter
we know by senses, void by conjecture. Sensation tells us
the world moves, and pleasure is possible. It is good
to know. It is a hand, mine, which wishes to touch her cheek.

Although Epicurus appears here to donate some legitimacy to the speaker’s consolation—“Sensation tells us / the world moves, and pleasure is possible”—Ramke avoids sentimentality in other poems by questioning whether that pleasure *means* anything. “This World’s Exuberant Surface” moves quickly beyond the multiplicity of appearances into much starker territory:

Gracian: “we cannot see clearly
the things of this world, save by
considering them conversely
to what they are.” This world being
the only one, one lonely consequence
resolves and solves for itself: embodied
drama of the world: what they are
things are is all we can safely say—

no, no safety there: are things?
And the lyric shape of the flock flying
flings itself into another appearance:
then a lyre, now a fan opening.

The challenge here is more problematic than the division of the world into noumena and phenomena. Instead, the poet asks whether the very concepts with which we describe the physical world—concepts as basic as materiality, physicality, or ontology—might be as slippery as the meaning of the words we use to name them. Ramke does not answer this question so much as provide a balm for it: if the same thing can be said to matter for more than one of us, then it must be a result of our common dwelling place, a habitation contoured by our shared capacities for observation and for speech, as well as our shared predicament, thrown as we are into a world that is “the only one, one lonely consequence.” His flock of birds implies an intelligibility prior to the shifting surface of appearance. But rather than resort to the usual idealist account for this intelligibility (that is, that the flock refers to something like the concept of a fan) Ramke suggests that the inverse may be true: that concepts may be determined only and always by their appearances. We may have no access to the “things” of this poem in the absolute sense, but we understand what the speaker means when he says that the flock of birds looks like a lyre, and then like a fan, because our experience of the visual world is similarly unstable. This vantage point provides the basis for a universalism: “Observation: / they crossed a sky and descended / onto a common horizon.”

This hope finds a corollary in the margins of *Matter*, where the poet invites his interlocutors directly into his poems, via generous and extensive citation. Some cases are more necessary than others. Readers of *Matter* will probably not need to be told that Walter Benjamin is the inspiration for “How to Picture the Angel of History.” In “The Naming of Shadows and of Colors,” however, the long poem that anchors the end of the collection, Ramke fashions a full stanza’s worth of material from more unconventional sources: Philip Ball’s *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* and Bartholomew Anglicus’s medieval encyclopedia *De proprietatibus rerum* (On the nature of things). The result is a list of scientific names for dyes and minerals that culminates in “cinnabar,” only to then unfold into a mythological account of the origin of cinnabar as the blood of dragons mixed with that of elephants:

Me, I like them all, all colors, shading
into each other, you know, the spectrum,
a spectacle of itself, oh, like a ghost. Specter,
inspector Ball provides the names:

verditer: artificial copper blues	
Mars colors: artificial iron oxides	Philip Ball,
lake pigments: from fabric dyes	<i>Bright Earth</i>
white—titanium dioxide	
cinnabar—mercury sulfide (red)	
cinnabar—blood of dragons and elephants— <i>According to</i>	
Avicenna the dragon wraps his tail around the legs of the	
elephant, and the elephant lets himself sink	Bartholomew
<i>upon the dragon, and the blood of the dragon</i>	Anglicus
<i>turns the ground red; and all the ground that</i>	<i>De proprie-</i>
<i>the blood touches becomes cinnabar...</i>	<i>tatibus rerum</i>

By placing his sources on the margin of this poem—not unlike the gloss of a more authoritative commentator—Ramke displaces his own authorship of these pieces, providing a genealogy of his own thinking that keeps the integrity of his source materials at least partly intact.

Matter does not provide its readers with an easily discernible lyric persona whose perceptions create poems, nor does it exchange the lyric speaker for the theoretician whose skepticism envelops everything but his own discourse. There is a third choice here outside the usual dichotomy, which Ramke's poetry seizes. It does pay a price for this: *Matter* is a thoughtful book, but it is not always a beautiful one. Occasionally, the poet's interest in epistemological arcana drags him into lines that are neither alive on the page nor hospitable to the voice. Metrical considerations, on the whole, defer to philosophical ones—although, in an unusual twist, Ramke is at his most lyrical in prose and his most halting in verse. It is also true that the project sometimes fails on its own terms; Ramke can only trace the relentlessness of the changeable for so long before the choice of his own words begins to suffer under the effort. Here, the reader longs for the more familiar register of speech to confirm the presence of a physical world marvelously deferred by inquiries into its existence.

Matter is most successful when it encompasses wide swaths of ideas and (written) discourses. Nearly every form of investigation falls under its purview, whether natural science or moral philosophy, botany or sex. If Ramke were to attempt fidelity to a narrowly conceived poetics, the poems would inevitably falter. But the poet's residual confidence, mellowed by an elegiac tone and deepened by self-criticism, ensures that the book succeeds, both as a collection of poems and as an extended thought experiment in the possibilities still open to a humanistic vision of poetry.

V. Joshua Adams