

ROGER CRAIK, THE ACADEMIC IN HIS POETIC POSE**Ioana-Maria Cistelecan, Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Oradea**

Abstract: Roger Craik comes from a British family of academics and for many years now he himself has been performing as a professor of literature to University of Kent, Ohio, U.S.A. As a poet, there is a sort of Neo-Expressionism, a coded inter-/ para- and meta-textuality which places him within the lyrical modern and post-modern paradigm. In this respect, if we are to encompass Roger Craik in a given acknowledged poetical pattern or if we are to appropriate him to our familiar poetic proximity, he might very easily belong to our so-called 80's generation of writers, displaying the same thematic, turbulences and tonalities.

Keywords: modern poetry, inter-/ para- and meta-textuality, poem of proximity, solitude, self.

Explanatory Preamble

English by birth, Roger Craik is now performing as an Associate Professor of English Literature at Kent State University Ashtabula, Ohio, U.S.A. Before settling here, he worked in Turkish universities and he was awarded a Beineke Fellowship to Yale in 1990. He traveled a lot visiting North Yemen, Egypt, South Africa, Tibet, Nepal, Japan, Bulgaria, where he taught in 2007 on a Fulbright Scholarship to Sofia University; during the academic year of 2013-2014 he was a Visiting Fulbright Professor to the University of Oradea, Romania. As he himself often confessed in interviews, poetry seems to be his inner passion and calling: he writes for at least an hour over coffee each morning before breakfast¹.

Yesterday Stasis...

I find it quite refreshing whenever the circumstances compel me to admit a simple truth that great minds pretty much think alike. Imagine thus my surprise when reading Roger Craik's poems and detecting a similar intrinsic imaginary reminding of, for instance, our Romanian contemporary poet Ion Muresan; there is a sort of Neo-Expressionism, a coded inter-/ para- and meta-textuality and also an imagery of the poet's interior stasis built up from and with concrete elements which place the two of them within the same lyrical modern and post-modern paradigm. In this respect, if we are to encompass Roger Craik in a given acknowledged and poetical pattern or if we are to appropriate him to our familiar poetic proximity, he might easily belong to our so-called 80's generation of writers, displaying the same thematic, turbulences and tonalities.

¹ Information provided by his most recent volume of poetry, Roger Craik, *Down Stranger Roads*, BlazeVOX Buffalo, New York, 2014. Other poetry volumes signed by the author are: *I Simply Stared* (2002), *Rhinoceros in Clumber Park* (2003), *The Darkening Green* (2004), *Those Years* (2007) and *Of England Sill* (2009).

The very first poetry volume that we are going to discuss, *Those Years*², deals with Roger Craik's inner crisis in his adult pose; both *incertitude* and *solitude* act as either the recurrent motif or the soul's label within this poetry. All modern series of "lacks" are to be identifiable in the author's volume: the couple's crisis, the lack of meaningful communication, the solitude as a burdening reality combined with the lack of it (tangible merely in a promise posture), the hollowness of love declarations, the routine's emptiness of living without her, always thinking of her, waiting for her sign, any kind of sign, all in vain – "Thursday dawned and Thursday came./ I knew my telephone would never ring again/ as it had done at nine o'clock/ for eighteen months before."; "as once again, / adrift, alone, / I dial the number I know better than my own// to leave a few more tiny words of love, in vain"; "You will go for walks, together./ You will never be alone// Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps no woman truly wants to be alone.// (...) Or so I hope."; "I think of as he turns to sleep/ toward you still, your face turned to the wall, / and hopes tomorrow you'll be once again/ as once you were/ to him."³ Both *the poem* and *the poet* make a resilient pair obviously opposed to *he and she couple's* impermanence. The authorial voice is self-defining by constantly including in his organism both *the permanency* (meaning the poem) and *the absence* (meaning the female figure). The solitude is bitterly marking the proximity in temporal and spacial limits while the fulfillment is joyfully marking the memories. Consequently, the reader is dealing with a fragile balance between reality and probability, respectively possibility, between the actual and the virtual, between loss and accomplishment – "Although he doesn't know it, these days are the last/ of his marriage. Perhaps he's reading now/ on his side of the bed, beneath his lamp, while you/ peruse the book of myths my father bought/ second-hand, in England, twenty years ago."; "Alone, of course, / again and again/ I press my bell/ and every time, although it's not/ - although my reason tells me that it's not -// it's you, it's you, it's always always you."; "I may never be included here,/ but if I am, I'd like to say/ that from his birth in 1956/ he flapped around/ doing this and that/ (...) where he continued to be lost until... "⁴. The organic, sonorous remembrance of her is inserted within detailed micro-realities, flooding the poem in a mixture of dull present and oneiric retrospections and projections; Roger Craik's reader lives under the impression of watching a screen and following the poet's intrinsic dynamic quite similar to a narrative; there is a story hidden in each of the author's poems x-raying jealousy, incompleteness and mainly the couple image which is exclusively complete in projected realms, never in reality: the couple's habitat is stamped by a Garden of Eden lost the minute she walked away...

The second book that we have chosen for analysis, *Of England Still*⁵ reveals no split personality, no double rhetoric, but the ambivalence, the construction of a *whole self*, made up of pieces, of fragments, of both nostalgia and reason. Roger Craik is revisiting himself in his early childhood years and later in his teenage-hood restoring a reunion, a copulation of the younger, in-experienced self to the adult photo of his ego; all senses are revitalized and they are all capturing their own pseudo-forgotten story, a stage of the good always prevailing embodying a well-defined reality as far as the child's world is concerned. The family portrait is be it complete, be it fragmented and it inserts the acute feeling of loss: the loss of innocence installs itself among disruptions, among distances imposed by exterior circumstances between the child and his parents; this very loss is comprised within the metaphorical transgression from colors to words, from innocence to corrupted adulthood – "Years passed. My colors faded into words,/ then schools and universities, awards/ for things that led me further from

2 Roger Craik, *Those Years*. Professional Reading Series van Zeno Press Cleveland, Ohio, 2007.

3 The selected quotations are to be found in Roger Craik, *Those Years*, quoted edition.

4 See Idem.

5 Roger Craik, *Of England Still*, Finishing Line Press Georgetown, Kentucky, 2009.

myself.”; “You are two years old./ You are sitting on an air raid shelter/ at the end of your grandparents’ garden./ The concrete is hot./ (...) You know that the daylight always comes.”; “I saw my mother in her fifties skirt/ (...) and then, as if to race the train,/ my father running after me/ not as an athlete would/ (...) but stroking, pressing down the air/ (...) I saw him in my mind’s eyes running thus/ (...) outdistanced, and outdistanced further still.”⁶ As he grows up, the bliss becomes disjointed as well, while the fear of misplacing the childhood and mostly the figures populating it definitely installs. Evolving as a human being gets to be similar to dropping your sincerity, to developing and mastering the art of faking. The adult’s mask would comprise all his past marks and the adult’s desperate attempt to recapture his past’s equilibrium, its certitude, its bliss is compelling him to act, to artifact himself. – “until it flaps away and I am left/ to muse how habit over fifteen years/ has withered us of words. And so I write/ these lines you’ll read when it’s too late to say”; “now I’m pretending that I’m loath to leave/ and when we are finally into our coats, and the band/ are packing up their instruments/ (...) I see his hand still holding her hand”; “over to the gramophone, draw out/ the ridged prismatic-black of album from/ its sleeve, perform// the delicate, the fearful/ act of lowering the arm”⁷. Once again the reader is dealing with the feeling of loss, another kind of loss: the burden of missing the dear ones, the severe possibility of misplacing them - they both perform as a definite proof of your broken, incomplete childhood circle. Time is no longer patient and this particular awareness of the fact that we are all facing the end and that nothing stays forever represents the inner bitter inscriptions of adulthood. – “Forty minutes left. The air is growing thinner, shorter-breathed./ Urgently, before it gets too late,/ I want to tell my mother that I love her,/ more than world away.”; “And so instead I choose to celebrate/ his *peterrades*, those volleyed trumpetings/ (...) and knew in mirth a boy’s unspoken love.”⁸

A Playful Intermezzo...

The volume we are also referring to, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin...*⁹, does not bear the signature of the poet Roger Craik; it is actually the facsimile of Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin, A Child's Story* beautifully illustrated and colored by his parents and given to him on his 6th birthday in 1962, when he was considered old enough to enjoy it. However, his parents “invented” the book a few years earlier. His father described the circumstances to his son as follows and described in the foreword of the book: “In September 1958 I went to New York to teach for the academic year at Queens College (CCNY), and Wendy accompanied me. (You remained in England, at Kingston, with Rita and Gary.) (Roger’s maternal grandparents). During the day, while I was teaching, she pursued her research on Jane Austen’s novels in the New York Public Library. We were living in East 58th Street. In February 1959 we used the break between semesters to visit Williamsburg, Va., where we bought the attractive traditionally-bound book in handmade paper which now contains *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. Our idea was to create a present for you on our return. I calculated the length of the poem and the space available and in the evenings of about a fortnight wrote it out and drew the pictures, which Wendy coloured in watercolour. We returned to England in May 1959.” Of course, Roger Craik remembers nothing of this, being only 3 years old at the

6 The selected quotations are to be found in Roger Craik, *Of England Still*, quoted edition.

7 See Idem.

8 Idem.

9 *The Pied Piper of Hamelin, A Child's Story* by Robert Browning Illustrated and coloured by T. W. Craik and W. A. Craik, Blaze Vox 2013.

time, but he does remember enjoying *The Pied Piper* being read to him, and sensing his parents' relish in reading aloud and their pausing to point to the illustrations.

In order to refresh our childish memories, a series of facts must be uttered relating the text: *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* in its initial form represents the subject of a legend concerning the departure or death of many children from the town of Hamelin, Lower Saxony, Germany, in the Middle Ages. The earliest references describe a piper, dressed in multicolored clothing, leading the children away from the town never to return. In the 16th century the story was expanded into a full narrative, in which the piper is a rat-catcher hired by the town to lure rats away with his magic pipe. When the citizenry refuses to pay for his service, he retaliates by turning his magic on their children, leading them away as he already had proceeded with the rats. This version of the story spread as a fairy tale. This version has also appeared in the writings of, amongst others, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Brothers Grimm and Robert Browning. The story may reflect a historical event in which Hamelin lost its children. Theories have been proposed suggesting that the Pied Piper stands for a symbol of the children's death by plague or catastrophe.

Thus, as the editor specifies, “the dramatic events that Browning recorded in 1842 marvelously unfold in the Craiks' illustrations. The pages have bold, imaginative drawings, deep lines, rich colors and fine (often idiosyncratic) details. From the pillaging rats to the gluttonous council members, every pen and brush stroke brings Browning's moral home. This work contains over 40 illustrated pages with hand lettering and includes a foreword by Roger Craik detailing this book's creation by his parents. This unique book is intended for all ages.”

Roger Craik has therefore proceeded with the rats (in a manner of speaking), he is re-experiencing his childhood's completion and bliss, making it possible for all of us to relive and moreover enjoy our past misplaced luggage, our remembrances belonging to our childhood splendid days, offering this particular colorful and joyful book as a gift intended not only for the public, but especially for his own parents; this proof of gratitude so original and ingenious reveals a genuine Roger Craik playing still, pursuing the rats...

Today Stasis...

Once again, Roger Craik is offering the reader an intriguing collection of poems, *Down Stranger Roads*¹⁰, his most recent poetry volume which stands for a book about the self's excruciating solitude within the world, a book about the world's both splendor and ingratitude, its substantial shallowness, a book about people, instant and brief most rewarding surprises and human vanity, its appearance and above all its rarely uttered nucleus. As Steven Reese opinionated, “What sets Roger Craik's body of work apart from that of so many contemporaries is the quality of its *savoring*, the sense that human experience in all its complexity is richly rewarding when we attend to it with a keen eye and an open heart.”¹¹ A certain uniqueness of his poetical articulated discourse has been also identified by George B. Bilgere who stated that “No one sounds like Roger Craik. His voice, a beguilingly cosmopolitan mix of British purebred and American mutt, is the well-stamped passport he

10 Roger Craik, *Down Stranger Roads*, BLAZEVOX BUFFALO, New York Publishing House, 2014.

11 See Roger Craik, *Down Stranger Roads*, quoted edition, cover four.

shows at border crossing from Ashtabula to Auschwitz, from Kent State to Krakow, from Amsterdam to the far-flung outposts of the human heart.”¹²

The author would simply demonstrate an already largely acknowledged fact according to which everything goes in modern and post-modern poetry, everything is allowed, there is no border, no limit, no prohibition regime. The world is functioning intriguingly while the lines are building up as paradoxical oppositions: *the proximity poem* is highly vocalized always targeting *the individual*; he/ she is apparently thrown in the middle of the world, constantly doing their best to fit in, to belong, to make sense and to define their selves. - “Despite the snow banked high to ice,/ the parking lot was jammed with cars”; “(...) The airplane slowly turns,/ banks into its leisurly decline/ toward another city's lights,/ its suburbs twinkling. It will not be long/ until he'll stand rehearsing someone else's lines/ written long ago when he was someone else./ These days he never writes.”¹³ *The self* is a spectator, a reflector, a mere guest in his own world; he is constructing the poem of proximity along with the poem of himself, but mostly the poem of his loneliness. Even the couple is eventually imprinted by a series of probabilities, never of viable possibilities; in spite of the momentary surprise, the other half of the couple never proves to be anything but a projected reality, denying thus the concreteness and the fulfillment of it. The couple stagnates in its artifact and virtual pose, doomed to an improbable future, never attached to an immediate present. (“and caught/ (...)/ the sound that suddenly meant you”; “until you came/ and pressed the bell/ and made me happy// then.// Alone, of course,/ again and again// I press my bell”; “And there I'd be,/ in one great sweep all fingers fumbling off your wedding ring/ and smoothing with my plans”; “Not two are close together./ Each one is drapped out on its own, draining/ into a flat white shoelace”; “you would listen,/ tousled with your fantasies,/ making the willow a fiend but a friend// in private, not a friend to talk about”)¹⁴ Powerful images do bear strong impact on the reader: *the black* with its shadows, variables, occurrences and innuendos is definitely leading us to the idea of ending, of final statement; all these cities, museums, paintings and songs, beyond labeling the inter-, para- and meta-textuality pattern they are obviously displaying, they are also a proof not only for the authorial traveler self's remarkable memory storing capacity, but mainly for the inner process of exaggerating in and out for de-frustrating sake exclusively: “Every six years or so/ you come back here, put up at the same hotel/ in the Anna van den Vondelkpark”; “ (...) She hums/ a line or two from Paul McCartney's song/ “Another Day” and sees, twelve hours away// beyond the customs wall a pacing man”; “Your eight short lines announce a different truth./ Immortalized by what you never were,/ a puzzlement to those whose Yeats descants”; “Instantly afraid, I hear/ my own voice downstairs/ announcing my name to no one in the dark”; “Fear, ferocity, astonishment in one/ maddish eye of yours from Audubon/ beneath a few spiked feathers for a crest”; “On the day that all the world had died,/ standing on my front door step/ with coffee in the dark blue mug I'd bought”¹⁵. Photos of strangers surprised or rather paralyzed within the proximity of the poetic self's both exterior and interior journey would make up the world seen as a circus, a mixture of shadows, precarious destinies and mostly unbearable solitude; with a proper attention for details, blowing out of proportions, the imagery is revealed for both poetry and ego reasons. Some common denominators, some hyper-marketed places are constantly identifiable in Roger Craik's lyrics – the recurrent battle targeting the author and the reader, be it the genuine one or the critical acknowledged voice, text interpretation which is never completely satisfactory, never totally trustworthy – these are all articulated or insinuated in a

12 Idem, cover four.

13 Selected quotations belong to the already mentioned volume.

14 Idem.

15 Ibidem.

game of ironical bitter counterpoints within the poem, thus linking once again the perverted outside with the lonely inside of the authorial self: “Near silence. Solitude. The gradual/ ebb and leakage into truth.”; “<This next one's a prose poem>, he intones,/ and I think what were all the others then. (...) // There's a bar just down the street.// There is indeed a bar just down the street/ and I could be there, there expansively to contemplate/ the art that is a pint of Guinness/ (...) Instead, I reason with myself, that I am here for poetry, to get a sense”; “And all the tumblers, acrobats,/ all the gauzy zoomers of the air/ dull themselves to baubles, gauds,/ drawing not one scrape of syllable/ from you”¹⁶.

International, cosmopolitan vibrant images, projections and virtualizations – they all balance in a tango stepping from slow motion to stillness rhythms of heart, of self; there is one familiar face in this dance of and for life that reappears: the grandfather, acting as a nostalgic pillar for the poetic self, essentially doubling his singularity. The present volume ultimately represents a trip along instants building up existence, completing gaps, ego-es, progressively articulating *the poems of the moment*, *the poems of proximity*, the ones that would last, the ones that would define the self.

References:

1. Roger Craik, *Those Years*, Professional Reading Series van Zeno Press Cleveland, Ohio, 2007;
2. Roger Craik, *Of England Still*, Finishing Line Press Georgetown, Kentucky, 2009;
3. *The Pied Piper of Hamelin, A Child's Story* by Robert Browning Illustrated and coloured by T. W. Craik and W. A. Craik, Blaze Vox 2013;
4. Roger Craik, *Down Stranger Roads*, BlazeVOX Buffalo, New York Publishing House, 2014.

16 Idem.