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The Polymers by Adam Dickinson

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The Opacity of Plastic

The Polymers by ADAM DICKINSON
ANANSI, 2013 \$19.95

Reviewed by CAMILLA NELSON

Plastic has never particularly appealed to me, and I don't feel I am unique in this (in fact I think the negative cultural connotations of plastic form part of the impetus for Dickinson's project). However, poetic experimentation does appeal to me. So, when I first heard Adam Dickinson presenting on polymer poetics at the inaugural conference on Eco-poetics, held at Berkeley earlier this year, my reaction was divided. Now, having read *The Polymers* I find my opinion divided still and for much the same reasons. The formal innovation, the playful materials and methods used within this book, are exciting, challenging, and refreshing. What feels important about this book is the way Dickinson materialises the abstract formation of polymers in his exploration of plastic's formal structure as a way of challenging our perception of plastic as a cultural construct. It is at this nexus between cultural value, cultural perception, and molecular make-up that this book functions most effectively. Whilst a plastic cup remains pretty un compelling, Dickinson's text makes polymerisation exciting. Projects like Dickinson's have an important part to play in expanding the scope of eco-poetics.

On the recto side of the initial plastic page, entitled "Cellophane," Dickinson writes that plastic's "pervasiveness, as a tool and as a physical and chemical pollution, makes it an organizing principle (a poetics) for recurring forms of

language, for obsessive conduct, and for the macromolecular arrangements of people and waste in geopolitical space." Elsewhere he has talked about how polymers "lend themselves nicely to poetic experimentation because of their intrinsic basis in repeated forms" and how he "began to see polymers all over the place in language and rhetoric (anaphora, polysyndeton, puns), as well as in social and cultural behaviours (fashions, memes, obsessions)" ("In Conversation"). My question for Dickinson is to what extent these repetitive organising principles, or poetics, are particular to polymers? Is repetition not an organising principle that is common to polymer and non-polymer structures alike? I find myself wondering how much of this interest in and adherence to repeating patterns is something that interests Dickinson intrinsically and how much it is particular, or exclusive, to polymerisation? Whatever the answers, I feel this book succeeds in his aim to "engage with science, inhabit its methodologies and signifying frameworks in order to expose the contingencies that lurk there and offer ways of re-conceptualizing and expanding the conversations around many of the issues that scientific discourse and research raise" ("In Conversation"). I think his efforts to "re-imagine the structure of polymers (their chain-like dynamics) in terms of their cultural and linguistic analogues" in poetry, usefully break open the molecular organisation of plastic in order for readers to revel in its structural principles and formal politics ("In Conversation"). But I think it is also important to register the self-declared impurity of Dickinson's approach to this study. Although he has clearly

interacted closely with experts in the field in order to construct this text, there is a healthy amount of play and push that makes this work creatively his own, and, importantly, deviant from the strict polymeric organisation to which this book pays tribute.

The Polymers is divided into seven sections, each one dedicated to the poetic exploration of a particular polymer. Each section is introduced by a diagram of the molecular structure of this macromolecule, which details how it has been poetically broken down or translated by Dickinson. The single letter form of each element is used as the first title letter of each poem. So, for example, in the section entitled "Polyester" there are ten poems beginning with C, eight poems beginning with H and four poems beginning with O to reflect the relative quantities of hydrogen, oxygen and carbon that make up this polymer. Each of these poems is radically different, in contrast to how we might imagine the uniformity of their respective elements, drawing attention to the space for fantasy and imagination that remains within and between the 'objectively known' elements of science.

There are a lot of poems in this text, which, given the density of each, can result in a feeling that this work is too rich to digest. "Cognitive Neuroplasty" models, in very simple forms, are the way in which this work, poem by poem, forges new linguistic and conceptual pathways between cultural elements at the level of syntax, line, and subject. This text is expert at thinking disparate objects together to form ever more cleverly constructed confections. My personal favourite from this collection, "Cigar? Toss it in a Can. It is so Tragic" (a title

that mirrors itself from the central C – Carbon atom), binds, and redefines, words according to their aural similarity to well known turns of phrase: "For all intensive purposes, the fire distinguishers/are pigments of the imagination." To fully enjoy the playfulness of this text I would suggest you take it a few poems at a time. The work you must undertake as a reader to consume the whole in one go is exhausting, and the feeling that more than half of its meaning eludes you, as if navigating a sea of icebergs ("ice that continues to wear its drink as a waking dream"), is frustrating despite its brilliance. But this experience of the text reiterates the extent to which polymeric construction remains largely unrealised, despite its natural (brain, skin, hair, DNA) and synthetic (clothes fabrics, makeup, and personal grooming products) pervasiveness in our everyday lives. To this end it seems only appropriate that a complete understanding of polymer poetics remains opaque and that the pervasive feeling generated by this text is one of half-knowns; this text may be plastic but it is certainly not transparent.

Works Cited

Dickinson, Adam. Interview by Sina Queyras. "In Conversation: Sina Queyras and Adam Dickinson." *Lemon Hound* 27 September 2013. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

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