"But Who Is Speaking": "Novelisation" in the Poetry of Craig Raine

In an essay published in 1978, John Osborne lamented the dismissiveness with which Craig Raine's first book *The Onion Memory* had been greeted by reviewers. He pointed out that they had failed to take account of the extent to which Raine was in a postmodernist tradition stretching back to Wallace Stevens, the Joyce of *Finnegan's Wake*, international surrealists like Lorca, Dali and Breton, and including, more recently, figures like Philip Roth, Kurt Vonnegut, Angela Carter and David Hockney. In these artists, he said, "the intense Modernist quest for a sense of the real is subordinated to, or abandoned in favour of, an aesthetic of the fictive" (54). Osborne pointed out that Raine, like all postmodernists, draws attention to the "ludic, fabulatory structure" (53) of his work. In answer to reviewers like Julian Symons and Derek Mahon, who took this as merely self-conscious and flippant smartness, he demonstrated how such self-reflexiveness works (albeit playfully and wittily) to reveal "the fact that our sense of the real is dependent upon our perceptual equipment, and that the said equipment is fanciful and capricious" (60) and that "all sentient beings are at the centre of their own universe but at the periphery of everyone else's" (61).

Osborne was amongst the first to discern the effects of postmodernism on contemporary British poetry. His essay on Raine preceded *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* by four years; in their introduction to that influential anthology Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison declared that "the poets included here do represent a departure, one which may be said to exhibit something of the spirit of postmodernism" (20) and described this departure as involving

a preference for metaphor and poetic bizzarrerie to metonymy and plain speech. . [and] a renewed interest in narrative – that is,
in describing the details and complexities of (often dramatic) in­
cidents, as well as in registering the difficulties and strategies
involved in retailing them. It manifests, in other words, a preoccu­
pation with relativism – and this represents a radical departure
from the empirical mode which was conspicuous, largely because
of Philip Larkin’s example, in British Poetry of the 1950s and 60s.

(12)

The introduction of postmodernism as a concept into the un­
derstanding of contemporary British poetry has helped Raine’s poetry
to be more widely appreciated. Osborne’s essay on Raine is still in
many ways the best (though the one by Alan Robinson¹ deals with
more recent material and contains much useful close analysis).
However, while Raine is a postmodernist in the general ways that
Osborne and Motion/Morrison describe, it should be said that this
(anyway deeply problematic) concept is unhelpful when it comes
to describing some aspects of his work, and that others actually run
counter to it. For instance, he is certainly not as postmodernist as
John Ashbery whose assimilation of surrealism has led him end­
lessly to deconstruct himself and to question the reality of what he
has said, is saying and will say. Ashbery’s poetic contexts continu­
ally dissolve: by contrast Raine’s poems usually have a single iden­
tifiable setting. In Raine the postmodernist impulse struggles with
a realist impulse to mirror the world in all its complexity; as he says
in his essay “Poetry Today”:

All good literature aspires to the condition of life. We know that
words are only words, but this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t spend
our lives arranging words and choosing words and coining words
so that we are denied by our own illusion of life. Joseph Conrad’s
preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” states the tasks of the
writer simply and movingly. It is “to make you hear, to make
you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more,
and it is everything.” Every serious artist believes this.⁵

In Ashbery, by contrast, the mirrors distort and multiply to infinity
– he is not interested in deceiving us with the illusion of life but in
drawing our attention to the deception.

Nonetheless, that phrase “deceived by our own illusion of life”
does indicate that Raine is a postmodernist of sorts – he is aware
that such verisimilitude is deceptive and his poems do keep ludically