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Book review:

Threads: The Delicate Life of John Craske by Julia Blackburn

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Book Reviews

Threads: The Delicate Life of John Craske by Julia Blackburn

London: Jonathan Cape, 2015. pp. 344. £25

Reviewed by Peter Robinson

Julia Blackburn has reason for being engaged by relations between art and damage, whether physical, psychological, or both. In ‘Valentine, Sylvia and now Elizabeth’, Chapter 51 of *Threads*, she briefly relates the story of how in 1937 Elizabeth Wade White came into the lives of Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner: ‘It all gets very muddled’, she writes, ‘and the situation makes me uneasy because I have a long history of uneasiness with triangular relationships and just reading about the three ladies and their confusion and heartbreak, their manipulation and connivance, leaves me feeling dizzy.’ This sentence directs readers back to Blackburn’s award-winning memoir, *The Three of Us: A Family Story* (2008). There ‘a long history of uneasiness with triangular relationships’, she being an only child in the catastrophic marriage of the poet Thomas Blackburn and the painter Rosalie de Meric, then subsequently in triangles with lodgers and her mother, is painfully evident: ‘just reading about’ her childhood, teenage, and early adult years left me ‘feeling dizzy’ and saddened too.

Her *Delicate Life of John Craske* is, in part, a postscript to the earlier memoir. One of the few to emerge from *The Three of Us* almost unscathed (no one does entirely) is her second husband, the sculptor Herman Makkink, with whom she had a relationship in the 1960s and early 1970s, eventually marrying him in 1999 at the time of her mother’s death. And whereas the earlier book has been structured around quotations from faxes to Herman reporting on those last months with her mother, in *Threads* it is Herman who is dying, finally succumbing (like her father before him) to a cerebral haemorrhage. The chapters

that touch on his illness and death interact with the Craske story, where a devoted wife helps to prolong the life of her artist husband – this hybrid book being one in which the figure of the author and the process of its writing are at times more present than the life and work of its titular subject. Chapter 22, in which Craske is not mentioned, begins: ‘In this odd pursuit of I know not what, I booked myself in for one night at the Royal Hotel in Great Yarmouth.’

All three of the sexually entangled women, whose relationship Blackburn briefly retells, promoted the painting and embroidery of John Craske, an invalid Norfolk fisherman who collapsed physically and psychologically during army training in the Great War. Valentine discovered him in 1927 and subsequently helped arrange an exhibition in London; Elizabeth promoted him in New York; and though only visiting the artist and his wife one time, Sylvia remained engaged with the preservation of his frequently fragile works into old age. Blackburn suggests that the shared passion for Craske helped Sylvia and Valentine to continue as a couple, reminding them of their more idyllic early life together:

Those early days of happiness had become encapsulated not only in the memory of their love for each other, but also in their continued love for the work of John Craske. What Sylvia called *his visual acoustics* had become part of their vision of a lost time. His passion to keep on working in spite of illness became their passion to work in spite of endless emotional upheavals. They felt he understood the true nature of art in its most fundamental form and they clung to him in order to keep close to their own belief in each other and in their work.

Why an ‘outsider’ artist should exemplify for them ‘the true nature of art in its most fundamental form’ is among the issues raised, if not wholly answered, by this strangely gripping, beautifully designed and illustrated book. The interest of vanguard artists in such outsiders has a history too: Henri (Le Douanier) Rousseau for *la bande à Picasso*; Alfred Wallis for the St Ives painters, W.S. Graham and Adrian Stokes; Henry Darger for John Ashbery; and John Craske for Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Valentine and Sylvia. These are all genuine ‘outsider’ artists and vanguard patrons or fans, while, to my mind, the perhaps similar-seeming L.S. Lowry and Joseph Cornell are not – because, in their different ways, both were art-world insiders (as regards their knowledge and practice), however much their characters and social settings may

have made them appear, for a time, marginal. True ‘outsider’ artists have their works moved inside by more powerful cultural operators, but themselves remain outside; and, as for Wallis and Craske, getting some of their work into collections didn’t substantially change their economic and social circumstances, as Blackburn’s book notes.

Their patrons, the above list suggests, tend also – at least at first – to be outsiders of a kind, whether thanks to their knowledgeable art-world experimentalism, or their being unfashionably Communist, or because of sexual orientation. What Blackburn calls ‘the true nature of art in its most fundamental form’ appears to touch on this, as does the allusion to Ernest Dowson’s poem and the word ‘amends’ in the subsequent paragraph:

It was an unlikely connection, but the two literary ladies remained true – in their fashion – to the invalid fisherman and his wife. While they wept and shouted and made amends and wrote poems and stories and letters of love and despair, the pictures on the wall were part of the family and never mind that direct sunlight was cracking the thin surface of the poster-paint colours and bleaching the embroidered stitches, or that clouds of cigarette smoke were slowly imbuing the fragile surfaces with a pervasive yellow stain.

She might seem to get the terms back to front here, for ‘made amends’ comes before ‘wrote poems and stories’ and we are asked, though I don’t quite manage, to ‘never mind’ that exposure to sunlight and cigarettes is depredating the artworks. But Blackburn had early and deeply engrained experience of how the reparative ambition for art that Adrian Stokes articulated, with its underpinning in the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, could be reversed for her bohemian childhood into miserable spirals of self- and other-destructiveness. In such a light, the story of Craske’s painting and needlework appears as an almost unfathomable dedication to an activity without desire for reward. Yet it doesn’t instance ‘art for art’s sake’ or disinterestedness either – for it might be said that what makes ‘outsider’ artists truly *outside* is that, being beyond any ‘art world’, they know and care nothing for autonomous ‘aesthetic realms’ in theory or practice. Craske’s works appear to have been made so that a chronic invalid could pass his time productively, relieve the symptoms of depression, and decorate the dwellings in which he and his dedicated wife, Laura, would live.

One problem for writers on ‘outsider’ art, then, is that the terms of appreciation are short on convenient reference points. Blackburn shows

images of Craske's work to a seaman, who, understandably, bases his comments on insider knowledge of the ocean and ships:

I showed him another picture, a grey trawler listing among the swelling waves of a grey sea. 'He's been there,' said Keith, with something like tenderness in his voice. 'You can't put that energy out unless you've been there. It's the hardest thing to do, to get a boat right, on the sea, in a painting. A wave is just a piece of energy that passes through a piece of water, but look at it, look how he's got it and he's got the way the elements fuse together. There's no defining line at the horizon. It's low pressure does that.'

However, the picture appearing above this passage doesn't fit the description given, for though the trawler is all but capsized in high waves, the smoke blown obliquely downwards from its funnels (there appear to be two), the sea is not grey but blue, and there is no horizon because the angle from which the image is represented does not stretch to a skyline, and nor is there any blur between sea and sky, because the waves are all topped with whitecaps. Such an insider-knowledge evaluation of 'outsider' art doesn't apply in most cases: Rousseau had no direct knowledge of tigers and jungles. Craske does have a decent grasp of linear perspective, so his boats do sit effectively into seas that recede from the picture plane, whereas the boat paintings of Alfred Wallis have as good as no perspectival depth. Craske might be an outsider, in this sense, but nothing like so 'primitive', a word for him that Sylvia Townsend Warner rejects by noting that 'if Craske is to be put into a category, he must be placed with the Intuitives – a companion to John Clare'.

Yet, despite seeming to get the 'amends' in front of the 'poems and stories' or of life-damaging art, Blackburn's *Threads*, with its Sebald-like wanderings in East Anglian spaces, is a further reparative action performed upon the hapless cruelties of history – history for her amounting to ways in which events, public and private, have traumatic consequences for individuals. She appears concerned too for how to avoid the sins of fathers and mothers being passed on unto the third and fourth generations. Her mother's father, in *The Three of Us*, is traumatised by his Great War experience. He may have then incestuously seduced his elder daughter, the sister of Blackburn's unloved mother, the seduced daughter then committing suicide by shooting herself with her father's own gun when she found herself pregnant.

Thus Julia Blackburn exemplifies in *Threads: The Delicate Life of John Craske* how such being sinned against and sinning need not be passed on, and how a devotion to art may help prevent this from happening – even when, as is by no means uncommon, the world of poets and painters is more problem than solution. It is in the light of such un-bohemian circumstances as are intermittently recovered here that the uncomplicated dedication of ‘outsider’ artists like John Craske can seem so refreshingly unspoiled.