

STEPHEN RODEFER

EDITED BY JOSHUA KOTIN & MICHAEL KINDELLAN

Stephen Rodefer's Position

Stephen Rodefer's poetry is a digest of the New American poetry and its chosen precursors. Olson and Villon, Ginsberg and Catullus, O'Hara and Baudelaire—Rodefer approaches them as colleagues, with envy and admiration. He disorders their experiments and appropriates their voices to fashion poems that are at once critical and revelatory. He is among his tradition's most virtuoso writers and its most comic antagonists. "Language pointed / To its content," he writes in *Four Lectures*, "A crowd of people at the beach screaming 'Tuna! tuna!'"

Considering Rodefer's biography, the scope of his writing is perhaps no surprise. He studied with Charles Olson and Basil Bunting in Buffalo in the 1960s, and replaced Robert Creeley at the University of New Mexico in 1967. In the 1970s and '80s he lived in the Bay Area and San Diego, where he worked with the Language poets and taught, among others, Jennifer Moxley and Ben Friedlander. In the 1990s, he moved to Cambridge, England, and into a community of poets including J.H. Prynne, Tom Raworth, Peter Riley, and John Wilkinson. During this time, he published over fifteen books of poetry, along with a handful of prose pieces, plays, and critical essays.

Rodefer's affiliations are as much a sign of his poetic identity as of his perpetual homelessness. Over his career he has self-consciously assumed the mantle of the romantic, roguish outsider—the nomadic interlocutor who descends on a scene, troubles it, and leaves (or is asked to leave). This sort of behavior undoubtedly explains some of his current neglect, despite the significance of his work. The predicament is no accident: in his poems and essays, Rodefer has theorized his conduct into an aesthetic program. In "Prologue to *Language Doubling*," reprinted in this feature, he calls for poets to cultivate "barbaric intuitions" as a means of "disregarding the approval of their admirers." The essay despairs in "verbal art as commercial venture or job application" and is aimed at poets making it big in the Anglo-American academies. This opposition to the academy is not a testa-

ment to Rodefer's authenticity, but to his esteem for opposition as such. "Difference is more useful than ambition or applause," he remarks in another essay included here, "and is actually a way of stating the basic concerns of all writing." (Whether Rodefer's esteem for opposition is a justification for his character or its motivating principle is an open question.)

This special issue of *Chicago Review* celebrates Rodefer's career. It begins with a long interview, which, at times, is more monologue than discussion. Rodefer is a storyteller *ne plus ultra*: "I mean, *interviews*," he notes, "They should first of all be cool reads, and then also something informative. Really, this is Poundiana and Olsonics and Edornicies." The feature continues with critical essays by Keston Sutherland and David Georgi on what are usually considered Rodefer's two greatest books, *Four Lectures* and *Villon*. It then reprints two of Rodefer's long-unavailable essays from the late 1980s. A short memoir by Fanny Howe follows.

The feature concludes with a selection of Rodefer's recent work, including his translations of Charles Baudelaire, which could be read as a sort of poetic homecoming, a return to his obsession with love and its attendant abasements, first announced in *Villon*. That book ends fittingly not with reconciliation but with flight: "he took one last gulp of dark red wine / and ducked out the door forever." Anyone who knows Stephen personally or knows his work or both will recognize the degree to which he most belongs—linguistically, socially, professionally—where he is least at home. For him, there is nowhere to return *to*. He lives in Paris, France.