

REVIEWS

The Beats: A Graphic History. Edited by Paul Buhle. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009. 199pp. \$22

Some will say, “At last! A comic book about the Beats!” Popular knowledge of the Beat writers suggests their appropriateness for a graphic novel: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs are our nation’s pulp culture poets, beloved for turning adolescent explorations of the free and freaky nether regions of postwar American culture into the hip literature of the baby boomer generation. The Beats, this new graphic history reminds us, “revolutionized American culture and consciousness” and “democratized poetry...taking [it] out of the academy and into the streets,” in part by forging new circuits of affect and meaning between approved literary forms and lowbrow popular culture. When we consider Kerouac’s and Burroughs’s “real-life adventure” stories alongside the innovations in the comic book genre (which flourished in the American counterculture of the 1960s and 70s), *The Beats: A Graphic History* seems inevitable.

Harvey Pekar and Ed Piskor, the writer and artist who created the popular graphic novel *American Splendor*, tell the canonized Beat story in the volume’s first half, while lesser-known collaborators (many of whom directly participated in the Beat movement) depict the forgotten names and faces of this generation in the second. The contrast between the sections reveals two very different approaches to this period of American literature. It also raises a question: is the story of the Beats best told as separate biographies of a half-dozen or so whiz-kid drop-outs who influenced each other before pursuing diverse political and artistic agendas? Or is it better imagined as a collective biography about group efforts to create new ways of being together—a generation’s refashioning of the textures of citizenship and ordinary life?

Pekar and Piskor take a clear position in their version of the story: they depict the Beats as a small group of stoned kids who rejected the benefits of postwar prosperity in order to play at being criminals. Somehow, their story goes, these thuggish sex offenders ended up becoming best-selling countercultural icons and are now increasingly respected by the institutions they rejected. We are given all of the most well-known anecdotes of popular Beat history: the early gatherings of Kerouac, Edie Parker, Neal Cassady, Lucien Carr, Burroughs, Dave Kammerer, and Ginsberg in Joan Vollmer’s New York apartment; Carr’s murder of Kammerer and Kerouac’s day in court; Burroughs’s murder of Vollmer and no day in court; the reading at the Six

Gallery in San Francisco; various trips to Mexico City and Tangier; etc. The telling is drab and straightforward, following first Kerouac, then Ginsberg, then Burroughs through these well-known narratives with a remarkably high degree of overlap, and with almost no quotations from the poetry and prose (probably the result of steep royalties demanded for publication of Beat material). In terms of information, the first part contains nothing an interested reader wouldn't have found in the seminal Beat histories, James Campbell's *This Is the Beat Generation* (1999) and Ann Charters's *Beat Down to Your Soul* (2001).

The most striking visual feature of this section is the repetitive simplicity in panel framing, sequencing and figuration. Consider the following two panels from a page about the most well-known of Kerouac's accomplishments—the writing of *On the Road* on a long scroll:

HE INITIALLY TYPED "ON THE ROAD" ON A 120-FOOT-LONG PAPER ROLL, NOT WANTING TO STOP AND CHANGE PAPER WHILE HE WAS ON FIRE WITH IDEAS.



JACK GOT MARRIED AGAIN IN 1950 TO JOAN HAVERTY, WHO SUPPORTED HIM FOR A SHORT TIME BEFORE DUMPING HIM. SHE CLAIMED SHE HAD A BABY BY JACK, BUT COULDN'T PROVE IT IN COURT. SHE RELENTLESSLY LITIGATED FOR MONEY.



Pekor and Piskor maintain direct correspondence between the verbal and visual descriptions of events throughout. The words sit in little boxes above the images; the images almost always include one word bubble, but rarely more than one. Little dramatic interaction occurs between figures in these scenes, which often feature a scruffy-looking figure against the backdrop of a gritty environment: the run-down apartment, the New York City street. With tedious regularity, these scenes are interpolated with panels that depict emotional energy as a radiating halo behind a figure that appears to directly address the reader.

The artists make no distinction between acts of artistic production and personality-forming crises. Yet they also somehow never manage to evoke the Beats' attempted merger of art and life. Instead, Pekar and Piskor maintain a total distinction between the writer as creative genius and the world in which the writer moves—a distracting, hostile environment, frequently figured as groups of hysterical, whining lovers. The following panel, depicting Ginsberg with the Merry Pranksters upon his return to San Francisco in 1966 (after being crowned King of May in Prague), is typical:



The mature poet shows frustration with the anarchic environment around him—an environment of mostly anonymous, younger “followers” who, as indicated by the clichéd lampshade on Ken Kesey’s head, are “partying.” Radiant lines depict either the din of the party or Ginsberg’s emotional state—either way, they displace the possibility of interactions between foreground and background characters. In this version of history, attention fixates upon those singular individuals who are most easily acknowledged as Great Writers because of their relative popularity among middle-class readers today. All others—and all events not directly related to the story of this writer’s maturation—become bland backdrop, the toxic environment that provokes but also threatens to hinder the personal achievements of a few worthy individuals. The global counterculture that the Beats helped to foster and that propelled them onto the stage of world history becomes an inarticulate nuisance—background noise.

No one seems more frustrated by this story of the Beats than Pekar himself. His commentary is mostly forgettable: “But listen, [Philip] Whalen is one of the funniest poets I’ve ever read”; “Like Rexroth, Ferlinghetti was a fine poet, but furthered the art in other ways as well”; and “Corso’s poetry has been called uneven, but at his best he is mighty good—witty, compassionate, and clever.” He occasionally lambasts his characters for bad behavior—“Kerouac had been somewhat of a bigot all his life”—but his disdain for his subject matter seems to generate disgust for the project itself, evident in the generally dreary tone of the entire piece. Wit is only brought into play in the worst way: the occasional

sneering insinuation of pedophilia, which is always directed at Burroughs and directly linked to his drug use. Halfway through Burroughs's tale, we get: "Burroughs found the dope plentiful and cheap, as were the young boy prostitutes"; and, exactly thirty pages later, the identical charge: "He left for Tangier, where dope was easily obtained, as were young male prostitutes." Many scenes are repeated almost verbatim in the same unenthusied, slightly disgusted tone.

Pekar's apparent distaste for the subjects of his prose can be seen as one line in a broader cultural divide between blue-collar populism and countercultural movements over the past half century. In an interview with Holly Seigel, Pekar answers the question, "Whose story do you identify with the most?" by saying, "None of these guys. My whole life, I've been a working stiff. I worked for thirty-seven years for the federal government as a file clerk. I had some flunky jobs, too; I used to write on the weekends. These guys attempted to be full-time artists." Pekar's attitude emerges from an identification with responsible masculinity secured by a lifetime of drudgery and in opposition to the queer romanticism of countercultural dropouts. Of course, this is a "bread-and-butter" perspective in several senses, for isn't Pekar and Piskor's evocation of the drab textures of cynical drudgery the source of their success? *American Splendor* capitalizes on a similarly dreary fatalism in its depiction of the miseries of daily life in the Reagan-era rust-belt. In so doing, it participates in a genre of the culture industry dedicated to promoting the world view of pissed off, white, working-class males in post-Fordist, downsized America. *The Beats* reveals how much this cynical populism is formed by pursuing "adult responsibilities," picking up the slack for a childish counterculture that is often trivialized in depictions of the free speech and antiwar movements.

This populist perspective often appears to contrast a working man's common sense with the opinions of an effete and pampered intellectual elite. In fact, the infatuated rejection of the Beats emerged in the academic culture of the 1950s, a phenomenon captured in Diana Trilling's 1959 article in *Partisan Review*, "The Other Night at Columbia: A Report from the Academy." Trilling was one of a handful of faculty wives who attended the reading by Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Gregory Corso at the McMillan Theater despite the conspicuous absence of their husbands (Lionel Trilling had been Ginsberg's teacher at Columbia) and she provides a glimpse of how the generation looked from the perspective of respectable society. She describes "the shoddiness of an audience in which it was virtually impossible to distinguish between student and camp-follower; the always new shock of so many young girls, so few of them pretty, and so many dreadful stockings; so many young men, so few of them—despite the many black beards—with any promise of masculinity." The easy condescension Trilling marshals in her critique of Beat queerness repeats itself in Pekar and Piskor's pissed-off ennui.

In contrast to the tedium of the first one hundred pages, the short-form pieces of the second half contain ninety percent of the innovation, wit, and knowledge one finds in the whole. The stories in this section are without exception interesting and informative. Three that stand out are a biography of Kenneth Patchen, written by Nick Thorkelson and Harvey Pekar with drawings by Thorkelson; a biography of Philip Lamantia written by Nancy Joyce Peters and Penelope Rosemont with art by Summer McClinton; and “Jay DeFeo: The Rose,” written by Trina Robbins with art by Anne Timmons. Also, we find in-depth accounts by Tuli Kupferberg and Ed Sanders of the formation of the Peace Eye Bookstore and the antiwar D.I.Y. rock band, The Fugs, as well as profiles of figures on the margins of already marginal Beat culture, such as Philip Lamantia and Slim Brundage.

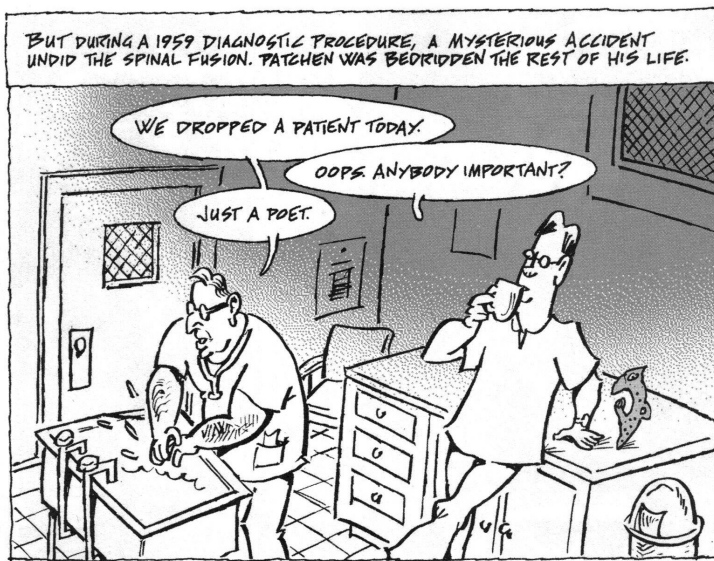
The images in the second half tend to be more detailed, with more mixing of figure and ground and more conversation. Here, for example, is a rap session between the founding members of the Fugs:



My favorite biography is that of Kenneth Patchen. Though the book's first section contained remarkably little quotation from the works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, Patchen's story narrates biography directly through his creative work, pairing snippets of verse with descriptions of biographical events. Patchen's verse and Thorkelson's accompanying art romanticize what Pekar and Piskor's narrative dulls—and I use the term “romantic” because of the interplay of fantasy, playfulness, and verbal and visual wit. Against the harsh spotlight of Piskor's forward-facing, singular figures, we get subtler, more complex panels. In one, young Kenneth lies in a rickety bed beside his grandfather, whose boldly recited quotations from Robert Burns hang in the darkness above them, and a little creature, reminiscent of Patchen's pen-and-

ink drawings of fantastical animals, stares from the lower left corner, apparently delighted by the poetry, or perhaps just the intensity, of its own bizarre existence. We have shifted worldly and worlding textures—from a poetics of cynical, bland harshness to one of optimistic, unexpected happiness.

There is nothing Pollyanna-ish about this style—in fact, because of its imaginative humor, the Patchen section proves all the more capable of treating grim subjects. Consider this panel, in which doctors discuss the accident that left the strapping and energetic Patchen bedridden for life:



It's a joke about professions—about the difference in cultural and financial capital between doctors and poets. But it's also about how the systems of modern medicine produce a distance between doctors and patients. The doctors are depicted as mere workers, whose anxieties are the ordinary ones of the job. This portrait makes their displacement from the poet all the more powerful—for a moment Patchen's centrality to the narrative is almost entirely dislodged: he becomes a minor figure in the story of his own life.

Perhaps the most interesting approach to this question about the relation of art to artist is "Jay DeFeo: The Rose," which is not the biography of an artist but of a painting. DeFeo's paintings were hanging in the Six Gallery on the night of the famous Beat reading there in October, 1955; three years later, she began to paint "The Rose," a masterwork that took her eight years to finish. DeFeo worked and reworked the painting, embedding materials and objects—strands of copper wire, beads, and a barrette—until "The Rose" weighed so much that part of the wall of her second-story studio was removed

and a crane employed in order to move the artwork, which currently resides in the Whitney. The story of this painting—which, we are told, “was the death of” Defeo (ingesting the lead of the paint, it’s suggested, gave her cancer)—reminds us vividly how art might intrude upon life. The artist’s obsession, the passionate, often hysterical pleasures of trying again and again to make the impossible thing, figures a dangerous pleasure that is the superficial core of the Beat phenomenon: in this world view, dedication does not take the form of cynical optimism but instead becomes vehicle to new pleasures—by doing what one should not, one ushers into the world new forms.

From this perspective, *The Beats* reveals a different kind of history. The three or four most prominent Beat figures recede, and an entire century of anarchist art practices emerges. These lesser-known figures represent a long tradition of radical organizing and theorizing—a populist counterculture that connects Wobblies to Beats to hippies to Black nationalists to punks and so on, in an endlessly transforming, multigenerational culture of D.I.Y. aesthetics. Their dedication to impossible projects might be called “practical romanticism”; see, for example, Philip Lamantia’s call to end “the supreme disalienation of humanity and its language.” These are Utopian objectives, to be sure—but pursuing such fantastic notions brings an irresistible springtime to the soul following the dolorous cynicism that precedes it.

Matthias Regan

§

Walter Mosley, *The Long Fall*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2009. 305pp. \$25.95

Considering that it included a half-serious call for “the end of the novel,” Walter Benn Michaels’s recent *Bookforum* essay, “Going Boom” (February/March 2009), met with surprisingly little resistance from the larger literary community. According to Michaels, the kind of fiction in which “what people really want is respect for their otherness rather than money for their mortgages” can hardly do justice to our moment of economic crisis. Toward the end of his essay, he even starts naming names: “For sure, no more books like *The Corrections*, or any of Oprah’s other choices. And no more stories about the children of immigrants, trying to figure out whether and where they fit into American culture.” Critics and novelists from across the spectrum accorded Michaels plaudits for speaking a courageous truth; “Going Boom” was feted with a special panel at the New York Public Library.

“Going Boom” met with enthusiasm in part because Michaels is right: contemporary literary fiction has an allergy to money problems. His prescription for this allergy is a combination of Brett Easton Ellis, whose *American*

Psycho he prizes for its satire of the ruling classes, and the HBO series *The Wire*, with its exhaustive depiction of criminals, cops, and civilians, all battered into fatalism by urban institutions. This solution, powerful as it is, remains artificially narrow. In searching for an alternative to the Oprah novel, Michaels hasn't looked as far as he might have: he does not see that both of his acceptable models belong, to one degree or another, to the larger, thriving genre of crime fiction—an American institution built on and around money. From Elmore Leonard's arriviste gangsters to Dashiell Hammett's cynical, salaryman detectives, crime fiction routinely documents both the movement of money and the degradations people will undertake to get it. In these narratives, money represents escape or power or triumph, and nobody ever gets ahead without someone else suffering. The recognition of this fact won't fix the housing market, but does at least serve as a compelling alternative to a litany of troubled suburbanites striving for liberation.

True to the tradition in which he writes, the crime novelist Walter Mosley rarely loses focus on his characters' checkbooks, or the way money expands and constricts their ability to live with their actions. Mosley is best known for his novels about Easy Rawlins, a midcentury Los Angeleno detective who wins and loses a small kingdom of apartment buildings to corporate skullduggery. *Blonde Faith*, the most recent Easy Rawlins novel, includes the following queasy pleasure: watching a blue-collar client beg to get some of his up-front fee back after Rawlins brings the client's runaway daughter home in less time than he had paid for. (Rawlins rebuffs him with an implied threat to let the teenager's pimp know where she lives.) Leonid McGill, the private detective at the center of Mosley's latest novel, *The Long Fall*, spends as much time trying to make ends meet as he does trying to solve the central mystery plot. As he accepts payment for a job that may have put four innocent men in danger, he thinks, "Who would take a job like that? Me. And I did it just to pay last month's bills." A journeyman P.I. cut from the John D. MacDonal school, McGill makes his living by renting out his moral agency for a day rate. Mosley's own interest in his hero's financial wherewithal becomes obsessive: the novel tracks exactly how much McGill makes for every job he takes and faithfully reports how and where he spends the money. In the first chapter, McGill worries about where next month's bill money is coming from; in the third, he negotiates late payment with his office building's rental agent; in the fifth, he bribes a stoolie with \$20 to rat out an old friend; by the tenth, he's considering taking a job from a hit man. Careful readers can tabulate exactly how much he makes over the course of the novel, and can divide the sum by the novel's double-digit body count to calculate the morality/money exchange rate. If "Going Boom" seeks to inspire fiction to grapple with economic reality, then *The Long Fall* ought to be just the thing for a critic like Michaels.

McGill does contend with problems beyond the narrow scope of market forces. He even has a family. But the traumas of marriage and fatherhood aren't presented as a refuge from capital—they're presented as yet another money hole that forces McGill to hire on with hit men whom he loathes. *The Long Fall* locates exactly where family falls prey to the forces that dominate working life. For example: McGill discovers that his teenage son, a puckishly criminal "dark genius" named Twill, has undertaken a high-minded, hare-brained plan to exact vigilante justice for a girlfriend. McGill starts a shadow campaign to avert his son's inevitable arrest for murder, a plan that involves dummy websites, tech-heavy surveillance, and, naturally, large quantities of money. To fund his efforts, McGill takes a job targeting a mob witness in hiding, even though he knows that by doing so he's pulling the trigger as a vigilante himself. There is no moral dilemma here because McGill doesn't see himself as making a choice. In *The Long Fall*, capital forces working people into indecent corners where they are expected to make snap decisions; to ensure the survival of loved ones, Mosley's characters often chuck morality out the window altogether. Opting out of the system leaves the people close to you without defense or resources.

Changing the system isn't an option, either. Reminders of collapsed revolutions dog McGill at every turn: the office he spends the novel trying to pay for is in the Tesla Building; McGill himself is named for Brezhnev, and he remembers his days as a red-diaper baby with condescension and shame. Even when he does manage a moral victory, it isn't through smarts or bravery. Instead, the heat passes when he realizes the hit he's agreed to help with is actually a smaller cog in a larger machine. Even a reprieve from violence has nothing to do with personal agency—it's a randomly dispensed gift from bosses with large bank accounts. The brutality of Mosley's depiction of need is where the dramatic force of the novel lies, and where it most directly engages both capitalism and the insoluble intrapersonal struggles capitalism creates. Housing crises might come and go, but the moral thrasher at the heart of economic inequality always grinds both quickly and fine.

What *The Long Fall* does offer by way of consolation is the notion that by remaining conscious of the compromises you make, it might be possible to feel coherent in a market-driven world that wants to pull you apart. McGill is immersed in a world of filthy lucre, but fully alive and conscious of his situation. Our hero never makes it free of the profitable yet dirty work he wants to escape, but the novel lets him acknowledge the ache it causes: "I was no longer a moral illiterate," McGill says, watching a man he may have to lead to his death. "I could read the signs and I knew what they meant."

Sam Eccleston

Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know*. Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2008. 100pp. \$12.95

Ciaran Carson, *Collected Poems*. Edited by Peter Fallon. Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2009. 591pp. \$19.95

Flip quickly through the nearly six hundred pages of Ciaran Carson's *Collected Poems* and the narrative of the poet's career reveals itself in the relative tautness or slackness of the lines skimming past. Expansion and contraction denote the poet's struggle to capture both Belfast's Troubles, and the troubled emptiness of love and friendship eviscerated by political violence. With his more recent efforts, particularly since the ceasefires of the mid-1990s, Carson has allowed the thematic primacy of Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict to recede into memory. At the same time, he has continued to explore how emotion and violence shape personal experience—albeit from perspectives that increasingly traverse history and locality. His latest work clearly displays a richly textured awareness of other lives that his early poetry promised us.

The improvement over *Selected Poems* (2001) is vast—but not only for reasons of expansiveness. Poems in the earlier volume stress images, tones, and moods that are alternately violent, decayed, timorous, and frightened. They also reinforce the widely held critical perception of Carson as a poet of place, one who explores Belfast's streets and alleys, its maps and cityscapes and ancient place names, in an effort to trace a centuries-old history of strife. By contrast, *Collected Poems* shows Carson's full range of interests. He invites the reader to share in his chronicling of *events* of everyday life in Belfast, including wakes, religious processions, excursions to the countryside, and dances. With "Céili," the poet enticingly relates how an evening at an Irish dance might develop for a young man wanting to attend, especially once a good helping of Irish moonshine has limbered his spirits. The second stanza reads:

And when you did get in there'd be a power
Of *poitin*. A big tin creamery churn,
A ladle, those mugs with blue and white bars.
Oh, good and clear like the best of water.
The music would start up. This one ould boy
Would sit by the fire and rosin away,
Sawing and sawing till it fell like snow.
That *poitin* was quare stuff. At the end of
The night you might be fiddling with no bow.

Carson displays not only the attention to detail and the biting realism for which he is well known, but also a sense of humor. He works in elements of Hiberno-English idiom, as well as the repetition and internal rhyme schemes that derive from ancient Celtic poetry, giving this poem an unmistakable

Irish heredity. Yet the poem is far removed from the desolate wordplay of Carson's poetry about Belfast City, substituting for it an undefined locale where the vocabulary of courtship and frivolity has its currency. Events are tinged with hope, as they populate a youth's imagination and memory. This poem (and many others like it in the collection) refuses to be submerged in the logic of trauma and obsolescence.

Poitín might be "quare stuff"; so, too, is Carson's ongoing experiment with poetic structure. The extended-line form, whose verbal abundance breeches the right margin and expends itself—often without metrical formality—in the space below, seems to have allowed the poet to unfetter his more deeply held impulses. The lid comes off of both thought and emotion in many of these poems, leading to the disjointed narration of "Dresden" or the seething, hallucinatory ire unleashed in "John Ruskin in Belfast." In the latter, Carson succeeds at his own version of folding history upon itself to expose the constancy of humanity's vilest traits and conditions:

The air is sick with vitriol, the hospital-sweet scent of snuff,
tobacco, linen.
And the labyrinthine alleyways are bloody with discarded
bandages, every kind of ordure:
The dung of horses, dogs and rats and men; and the knitted,
knotted streets
Are crammed with old shoes, ashes, rags, smashed crockery,
bullet casings, shreds
Of nameless clothes, rotten timber jaggy with bent nails,
cinders, bones and half-bricks,
Broken bottles; and kneaded into, trampled, or heaving,
fluttering, dancing
Over all of these, the tattered remnants of the news, every kind
of foul advertisement,
The banner headlines that proclaim an oceanic riot, mutilated
politics,
The seething yeast of anarchy: the very image of a pit, where
a chained dwarf
Savages a chained bulldog.

In this imaginary excursion, Ruskin's elevated sensibility recoils at the encounter with this city as he goes in search of a Turner painting hanging in a gallery. Carson seems focused on refuting Ruskin's well-intentioned but nonetheless inane observations about mid-nineteenth century Irish political and social grievances. What makes his poem more compelling is its placement within the framework of the original text, *Belfast Confetti* (1989), where it contrasts with an interior of tightly constructed poems dealing with a single object or theme—plus the occasional sober essay on regional history or etymology.

Carson has used the structure of his books to his advantage, but his experiments in this regard are not uniformly effective. Sometimes, they seem like gimmicks: *Opera and Et Cetera* (1996) uses not one, but two sequences of poems based on alphabetical succession. *The Twelfth of Never* (1998) explores variations on a sonnet form that chokes off the vitality of each poem. Consider “The Rising of the Moon”:

As down the glenside I met an old colleen,
She stung me with the gaze of her nettle-green eyes.
She urged me to go out and revolutionize
Hibernia, and not to fear the guillotine.

She spread the madder red skirts of her liberty
About my head so I was disembodied.
I fell among the People of No Property,
Who gave me bread and salt, and pipes of fragrant weed.

The pale moon was rising above the green mountain,
The red sun declining beneath the blue sea,
When I saw her again by yon clear crystal fountain,

Where poppies, not potatoes, grew in contraband.
She said, *You might have loved me for eternity.*
I kissed her grass-green lips, and shook her bloodless hand.

This poem succeeds as a mild knock at the Celtic Twilight poets for their overbearing principles of sacrifice and spirituality, but, like most of the other sonnets, it comes across as flimsy and pallid against the other work in the collection. Thematic unity, rather than structural (or formal) unity, shows this poet at his best; in the second half of *Breaking News* (2003), with a series of poems under the title “The War Correspondent,” Carson hits the same brilliant stride he had in the late 1980s. These seven poems take as their ostensible theme the battle sites and cities of Crimean War, weaving historical fact and imagination into a poetic reportage of horror and absurdity. From “Balaklava”:

The skeleton of an English horseman
had tatters of scarlet cloth hanging to the bones of his arms;
all the buttons had been cut off the jacket.

Round as shot, the bullet-skull had been picked clean
save for two swatches of red hair. The remains of a wolfhound
sprawled at his feet. From many graves the uncovered bones
of the tenants had started up, all of them lacking boots.

Here the images of violence from a battlefield in Eurasia recall the assassinations and reprisal killings of the Troubles, of bullets shot cleanly into the back of an informant's head, of a body dumped unceremoniously along the River Lagan, as in the poem "Campaign": "They took him to a waste-ground somewhere near The / Horseshoe Bend, and told him / What he was. They shot him nine times." Or "The Mouth": "By the time he is found there'll be nothing much left to tell / who he was." Or "The Knee": "His first bullet is a present, a mark of intelligence that will / End in the gutter behind The Clock Bar, since he keeps / on doing what / He's not supposed to." The reader almost senses in "The War Correspondent" Carson's relief at the ubiquity of pointless political violence—it somehow contextualizes, if not quite justifies, his own experience in Belfast. A soldier is a soldier, and a war is a war, whether that soldier rides with the 13th Light Dragoons or sips pints a full century later at the Arkle Inn.

With the recent *For All We Know*, Carson has added another exemplary investigation of the frailty of life and love to his oeuvre, even though it too is based on a somewhat contrived structure in which two parts each follow a sequence of poems with the same titles. The poems do not adhere to an obvious thematic arrangement or develop a coherent narrative, although they all involve the same two characters, the Irish Gabriel and the French Nina, who struggle to negotiate some respite from internal failings and external disruptions, to find a place where they might reconnect emotionally and physically. The patterns that do emerge are generated by Gabriel's memory only, and seem to resemble what an epigraph from Glenn Gould describes as the "shifting melodic fragments" and "perpetually unfinished" state of a fugue. *For All We Know* is perhaps best read for the first time cover to cover, then by reading each corresponding poem side by side, and then again from first to last. This method, or some variation of it, helps to bring the interconnections among all the poems to light.

The book as a whole takes up the problem of doublings and disjunctions within the self and between self and others. Carson's two main characters are both of "doubled" progeny that erodes their sense of coherent unity. Gabriel, like Carson himself, is split between the Irish and English languages, while Nina appears to be of French and English extraction, still haunted by the wars on the Continent that helped tear her family apart. Gabriel describes their condition in "On the Contrary":

It's because we were brought up to lead double lives, I said.
Yes, you said, because of the language thing it was one thing

with my father, another with my mother. Father tongue
and mother tongue, all the more so when they separated

irrevocably.

Carson's delicately composed lines signal the intense mental focus required to stay atop the faults and crevasses that run through and between his characters. He contrasts the frailty of identity with a series of luxury items that seem to defy time by remaining always functional, reliable, and desired: Montblanc pens, a vintage Omega watch, a famous perfume worn by successive generations of women. Human beings, the book suggests, have a near mastery of mechanical and artistic products, but they continue to fail at their internal inventions: loves, desires, ambitions.

And yet, somehow, all is not failure: *For All We Know* shows how modern ethical life is shaped by a colloquy of economic, political, and (mostly) psychological forces that do as much to bring people together as hold them apart. Carson's work demonstrates the extent to which we are bound to language for the constitution of our identity and our reality; it also reminds us that language is not our exclusive mode of engagement with one another, and that compassion and love bind us in ways we cannot always comprehend, persisting in memory against our every wish and reason.

Michael Baltasi

§

Arda Collins, *It Is Daylight*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 93pp. \$16

Arda Collins is the most recent winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize, and this time Louise Glück has selected a book with some bite. Disoriented and bereft, the speakers of these poems don't seem too put out by it. They have been so utterly humiliated by their own reflective lives that they know no shame. One wakes from unplanned, overlong naps and then disaffectedly captures the pulse and glow of the ambient world. Another one drifts through empty rooms in a lonely house in a subdivision or college town where she has not lived for long, where, in one sense or another, she is just passing through. Collins's voice is menacingly meaningless but not without whimsy:

I called my house from a pay phone
down the street before I went home.
I needed to check on the empty situation.
(“It Is Daylight”)

The “situation” is markedly interior, as it consists in a mode of anxious yet bemused introspection. We might think of it as a form of chronic disinterest that wryly places even the most quotidian of activities at an unnatural distance. Here's a sampling of such moments from three different poems.

Every night
at dinner you're sitting with
the phrase "down the hall," because
you look down the dark hall
from the chair at the kitchen table
and wonder if it's snowing.
(“A History of Something”)

I sat on the couch and watched it get dark.
I was getting hungry, but I felt afraid
of seeing the refrigerator light go on.
(“Spring”)

Afterward, I was relieved
that I was still myself. I drove home at midnight,
but maybe it was only nine-thirty.
I was tired, so that was ok.
What did I have going anyway?
Plus I like the part when those things end.
(“Bed Poem”)

These moments work to make things strange; what we read are the deadpanned reports of someone who is an old hand at treating herself as a foreign thing. Her perspective often makes her activities seem not only strange but also homely and a bit sad. The consolation for this is the attainment of a clear-eyed humility about how creaturely even self-reflection is.

Collins often employs speakers who oscillate between childlike and adult perspectives to generate and maintain the distance she seeks. In “Pool #3,” the speaker cowers and peeks from inside her house as the ice cream truck comes and goes:

I don't come out until he's gone;
I'm amazed at how still
I always am, but all the time I'm thinking
about the dollar bills in my wallet;
picturing myself out there next to his white truck;
buying a King Cone;
looking at pictures of the ice creams
on a deep blue background;
reading the names and descriptions
of all of them, each one
shown with a bite out of it
so you can see what the inside is like.

The subject matter and the tone of “ice creams” are infantilizing, but the paralyzing self-reflection is markedly adult, as is the somehow perverse

fixation on the ice cream man himself, the King Cone, and standing there “next to his white truck.” This poem works like several of the others in the book; it asks us to abide in moments of ambiguous and awkward childishness and passing moments of mildly erotic panic, probably because these are the moments we are normally least likely to hold up for inspection. “Pool #3” ends with this odd confession:

I would like to do this with people
so that I can see all the swimming pools inside them.
I'm hiding so because *I don't want*
the ice cream man *to see my swimming pools.*

The child-like speaker, the ice cream man, and a little too much intimacy combine to create a certain creepy effect, one that has the smack of a real, private life. Peeking into this life is one of the book's pleasures; like the speaker, “I duck / under the window curtains,” but I keep on looking.

Another poem, “25A,” embeds a narrative that seems to come from childhood, and yet it cannot, as it involves the speaker going to a hospital, “just / to visit his son.” The ambiguity of the embedded narrative works to suggest another uncanny child-adult speaker. The poem ends on the way home from the hospital.

Your sister
makes up a song in the car
about her new couch. You take turns
singing the made-up verses.
You drive past the water.
Do you go ahead
and laugh at the water?

Making up songs together is a children's game, but getting a new couch is an adult's game. The speaker and her sister move easily between these worlds; that is, until the arresting final image threatens such play with engulfment. Their mobility of perspective is evidence of the impermanence and even inconsequence of the identities they pretend to master.

The last two poems cited have fitting, powerful endings, a trait sadly not shared by many other poems in the collection. Consider “Letter Poem #6,” a love poem (to February) that's just a little too impartial to be affectionate:

Your purples—
how do I say it?
They are not even purple;
it's as though you make all the houses ugly again, *every day*—
god how I love that—
what you do with aluminum siding,

it's practically music—
it's like listening to a bus pull away—

These lines oscillate wonderfully between affection and cruelly ill-timed aperçus, in a kind of schizophrenic embrace. But then the end of the poem attempts to make an argument for the human, culminating in a limply inventive catalog of what “February” doesn’t get:

If only you knew how it is
not to understand why seeing people’s breath in the street
is not the same as snowing—
it’s like chewing gum, smoking a cigarette,
getting cramps, throwing up,
making out in the dunes on the hillside above a chimney town.

These last lines try to invoke the uniquely human ability to reflect on our creaturely status without attempting to transcend it, a notion Collins elucidates in a piece of autobiographical prose called “Parts Of An Argument”: “What is so great about being in life though, is that you can lie down and breathe as a mammal in time, and I enjoy that.” So, the penultimate lines of “Letter Poem #6” rattle off a list of unreflective but characteristically human experiences—as if there were something both deflating and yet universal in a good honest puke. This lowers the stakes so much as to obliterate our agency, and the concluding line of the poem feels arbitrary as a result.

Of course, so constantly employing childish speakers narrating embarrassing daydreams runs certain risks, and several of these poems, especially longer ones like “April,” “Pennsylvania,” and “Central Park South” devolve into quasi-surrealist montages laced with tedious extended metaphors. “January,” for example, begins with an interestingly alien perspective on a house fire, but the second half unravels as the speaker riffs on the blanket given her by a fireman, complete with a fantasy about running off to a chalet and playing Heidi to an imaginary Heinrich (and/or running off with the fireman). At such moments one mutters, probably with some affection, “Oh stop.”

Dustin Simpson

§

Stephen Rodefer, *Call It Thought: Selected Poems*. Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 2008. 193pp. \$38.95

Many critics concur in characterizing Stephen Rodefer’s poetry through cancellation—not American but not not-American, not Language but not not-Language, not at-home but not not-at-home. But none of these and

therefore all of them. Given the publishing history of *Call It Thought* and the nationality of the critics called upon to usher it into the glare of obscurity, Rodefer's writing has apparently been marked For Export Only. While British poet-critics like Peter Middleton and Tony Lopez receive American approval as not-British Britons, this American ne'er-do-well restores the balance of trade. How has this come about? Does this work accord more with an alien understanding of American culture than with even a dissident view at home? Are American ears deaf to the crash of "garbage-language and tinsel-syntax," as Keston Sutherland characterized Rodefer's verse (in *CR* 54:3)? Or does the answer lie in the cultural cliché of American positivity and British negativity; if double negatives stick to Rodefer like flies, is that the kind of positivity acceptable in Cambridge?

Call It Thought is a selected poems, as its subtitle acknowledges. Presumably Rodefer's own selection, it divides rather easily into four groups: a rough-house romanticism that has much in common with Ed Dorn's early romantic lyrics and is represented by poems drawn from Rodefer's first three books; a tiny portion from *Four Lectures* that is placed out of chronological sequence at the front of the book, while a more ample and chronologically positioned selection from *Passing Duration* finds its correct place; then there follows a lengthy central section of squibs and general smartass behavior. The book concludes with verse preoccupied with the expulsion from Eden, Eden being strangely a place of bondage. This will be explained below; some of this later writing is very remarkable. However, the third section's splurge at the expense of a fuller presentation of *Four Lectures* mars this selection badly. This is not the selected that Rodefer deserves; call it a curate's egg, but of course the idea that he might do himself justice could scarcely be entertained.

All the same, this book contains wonderful and almost annoyingly memorable writing. Like Ted Berrigan, Rodefer thinks in phrases that lodge like prisms, but in phrases more extended than Berrigan's, drawn out to twenty beats; and like Berrigan his problem is how to assemble verses and then put verses into poems, how to go somewhere. True enough, the very idea of going somewhere has been energetically in question for Rodefer since *The Bell Clerk's Tears Keep Flowing* (1978) with its "Ode to the End," a poem included here. The poem ends in the cadence of Frank O'Hara's "Ode to Michael Greenberg ('s Birth and Other Births)"; but where O'Hara has "and one alone will speak of being / born in pain / and he will be the wings of an extraordinary liberty," Rodefer has "even though the strain remaining is pasture, / or injury, or futurity, or recklessness, / left to browse on the stalk of a rocky but veteran abandonment." "Ode to the End" asks the question early: "will this graceful reverberation go on forever?" And it will, until simply abandoned. The poem exhibits one of Rodefer's strategies for going somewhere, which is to ventriloquize another's coherence, but every

strophe feels abandoned cursorily for all the expansive talk of love or pasture or futurity, and every successive strophe must start again.

In *Four Lectures* (1982) the “graceful reverberation” of the earlier poems turns to jitter, but jitter contained and agitated in stanzas of fifteen long lines, a solution reminiscent of Berrigan’s sonnets if more enjambed. These poems seem as unsurpassable in Rodefer’s oeuvre as *The Sonnets* in Berrigan’s—which is why the inclusion of a mere sixty line figurine out of the full poem’s fourteen-hundred hardly does it justice. The “Preface” to *Four Lectures* declares: “We start to be fed things forcibly. We can throw up, not eat, or fold the spoon in half.” A few lines from the extract provided in *Call It Thought* demonstrate that these three are not choices made in the event, and the poem makes all of these refusals at once and at every moment:

There is a little door at the back of the mouth fond of long names
Called the juvjula. And pidgeon means business. It carries
Messages. The faces on the character parts are excellent.
In fact I’m having lunch with her next week. Felix nupsit.
Why should it be so difficult to see the end if when it comes
It should be irrefutable. Cabin life is incomplete.
But the waterbugs’ mittens SHADOW the bright rocks below.
He has a resemblance in the upper face to the man who robbed you.
I am pleased to be here. To my left is Philippa, who will be signing for me.

“Juvjula” changes character from oral to written since it can be pronounced “uvula,” which indeed is “at the back of the mouth”—it is the piece of soft tissue dangling in front of the throat. Already this is dizzyingly ingenious. And it is entirely true that “pidgeon” or more commonly “pidgin” “means business,” and this written word originated in the mouths of Chinese merchants, approximating the English word “business.” But then pidgin summons a carrier pigeon that “carries messages.” Faces and characters are used by a typist or typesetter to carry messages too, although the “character parts” are played by actors and actresses, and presumably a message has been carried to the woman “I’m having lunch with”; an actress maybe. She may be the Philippa of the last line “who will be signing for me,” which might mean I am deaf and she is using a language neither written nor spoken, or that she will be impersonating my signature. These complications of written, spoken, and visual language wrap various attempts to end the incompletable. The Latin tag “Felix nupsit” quotes from Pound’s “Canto CX,” the first Canto of the last and conclusively inconclusive volume *Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII*. “Cabin life is incomplete” conflates “Cabin life may be sweet / But it sounds so incomplete / I prefer my easy street right now,” lines from the version of “Cabin in the Sky” sung by Ethel Waters and Eddie “Rochester” Anderson in the 1943 film of the same name. “Incomplete” now suggests the unfinished rather than the

heartsick. The line about the “waterbugs’ mittens” sounds like a wicked parody of the spots of time supposed to gather up the fragmentary Cantos in service of the ahistorical imperative—such stuff as “topaz against pallor of under-leaf” is as rife in “Canto CX” as throughout *Drafts & Fragments*. “I am pleased to be here” seems to be announced chiefly so that Rodefer can then write “To my left,” and this will mean the gutter of the page, a final affirmation of the faces from which the poem apparently is made—or not, since Philippa’s face is situated outside the textual area. I shall leave a residual line to the ingenuity of other readers interested in faces and resemblances.

What does this little gloss suggest? First, it argues that something poetic is taking place, even if it isn’t going anywhere; for in fact “I am pleased to be here.” Second, that what is “thrown up” is then eaten again, and quite successfully digested, and that while the mouth is doing its business, the implement is waving about, describing arabesques and showing off in a way that is witty and attractive. To have kept these modes together for a poem of well over a thousand lines, until the last words “I like your voice. Look where it’s come from,” remains astonishing. Rodefer announces in the poem’s “Codex” that what he has written is a kind of pastoral, a “glebe,” which is true insofar as it is fantastically artificial and considered. The jitters are intellectual; this poetry is hyperactive and hyper-receptive. The trick is to get the timing right, to get all the jitter working in line and then in the stanzas and then in the poem and then in the book. “Reverberation” requires space, but *Four Lectures* is one enormous oscillating device whose every component hums. This is a kind of thought of a high order, but it is not thought as we know it, for it is neither consecutive in its moves, nor is it inductive. Indeed it is poetic thought, contriving a generative activity through constellating rather than laying out.

Trouble is, nobody was going to get it; at least, not so far as the author was concerned. It’s true that *Four Lectures* was first published with encomia from Robert Creeley, J.H. Prynne, and Ron Silliman, a future-proof lineup indeed, and it went rapidly into a second printing. But this book epitomizes the text into which its author has poured his all; there can be no adequate response. Extravagant praise itself becomes a kind of evasion, especially since this book was published at a high-water mark of mutual boosting between the poets of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, a cultural phenomenon Rodefer addressed in *Four Lectures* with the tact for which he is known. In their different ways the encomiasts agree that *Four Lectures* is a work precisely and adequately responsive to its time, very much what was being said about dozens of other variously scrambled works then being published. But the sexy condition of being contemporary (so much more modern than modern) is much too general to measure the erudition as well as the hyper-responsiveness of these poems, their poetic as well as their forensic force. In the U.S. *Four Lectures* seems to be remembered as a period work vaguely assigned to West Coast Language

poetry, except by a nest of poets in Maine; but the book's transformatively recapitulatory quality has been generally missed. Across the Atlantic *Four Lectures* shows up as the greatest American poetic achievement of its time, and this is in major part owing to the constraints that bear on it and that it recognizes and hums within so densely and intelligently. All the stuff in the world may be on open access for the Californian writer, but Rodefer tracks the compaction of stuff within cultural and political limits.

Given that what critical attention has been offered to Rodefer has centered on *Four Lectures* and *Villon*, it seems opportune here to consider particularly the more recent poems—those first published in book form in the present century. Truly, Stephen Rodefer appears more and more a late epigone of Hölderlin rather than of Villon. As the title of his 2000 collection has it, he is the poet “left under a cloud,” the poet expelled from a world of nymphs and symposiasts, in short the poet ejected from the bar of King's College Cambridge, his haunt during a term as Judith E. Wilson Fellow in the Cambridge English Faculty (and Rodefer managed to finagle a set term into an indefinite term). It is hard to imagine how a reader unfamiliar with King's and with the younger (and some older) Cambridge poets would negotiate the many specific allusions in the laments comprising the last hundred pages of this 270-page selected poems, even if the burden is obvious enough. Lechery, resentment and abjection keep these poems active: after a dizzily erotic overture, they are obsessed by exclusion from the frolics of the young gods and goddesses of King's, resentment at widely published contemporaries, and resentment at the academically sponsored and tenured. Where unsustained by lechery, resentment or abjection, the poems collapse into heaps of linguistic debris; they absolutely need a vector of desire, its objects attainable or withheld. Sometimes this produces sorry stuff:

Take that hireling
over there, for example, just another
pre-sold member of an avant garde
between covers, his finger on his pin
the one put up for the spot this season

One jiggle of the real
and the impinger is erased
(“Titular”)

This hardly merits the name of satire, for the lineaments of the arraigned avant-gardist are vague where they should be savagely ad hominem, and “the real” is abstract where it must be abrasive—indeed if the avant-gardist is an “impinger” that's more that can be said of “the real.”

The grand poems of this period are the longest: “Arabesque at Bar,” “Answer to Doctor Agathon,” and “Beating Erasers.” Even in its title the first poem unites the roué at the bar and the ballerina at her exercise, and prosodically the workout is sustained for over 450 lines. Except when ventriloquizing, Rodefer needs a prosodic routine to stay buoyant just as he requires a fixed object of desire or abhorrence. Both in this poem and in “Beating Erasers” he borrows the three-line shingle from William Carlos Williams—but in Rodefer’s usage this switches, appropriately enough, between whiplash and stagger. Rodefer is terrific at openings, and here is the first strophe of “Arabesque at Bar”:

ARISE
 tin Lizzies
 who adore
the wooden beam
 and dim apensicolar
 harbingers ashore
Glad call thunders
 from the faggots
 and your arabic
chain and ore
 vile bondage
 of adornoboy
what Britons will
 the clitheria
 of liberty fear
with a cold
 hand and
 an insensible mind
muff the miff
 the Russian canes required
 which blooms
buried lost
 with your fair
 tutu skein.

It is remarkable that poetry can be at once so obscure and so invitingly open, and it scarcely matters that “apensicolar” and “clitheria” have been conjured up for the occasion, for they seem to ARISE out of sheer high spirits. Some obscurity would seem better left unexplicated; a Russian candy cane refers to a sadistic sexual practice that interested readers can research for themselves. But in any case, S&M and bondage are here associated with training for the ballet (“wooden beam” and “tutu”) and not implausibly; to know this provides the orientation allowing much that follows to fall into line. The British

vice of flagellation keeps this phrase making at a fair crack. “[A]dornoboy” (picking up on “adore”) could be a parochial reference to the then-glamorous (who knows, maybe still) poster boys of the Cambridge English Faculty, and their intellectual discipline. Their recurrence in other poems tends to figure them as envied virile youths. The poem’s succeeding pages are filled with such parochial references; but what dominates its strophes is the most flagrant poetic paeon to B&D sex in the English language, except Barry MacSweeney’s “Liz Hard.” The chief difference between the poems is that MacSweeney’s B&D is always linked, however speciously, to a political diatribe aimed at Margaret Thatcher as dominatrix-in-chief, while Rodefer doesn’t spare so much as a passing thought for the power play in his dance studio/gymnasium/boudoir. From some corner of his “insensible mind,” he summons Catullus to join him in “Keynesian economies”—one might have expected the severe monetarist discipline of the Chicago School, but this is King’s College, where the shade of J.M. Keynes presides. And Keynes was married to the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova.

The apotheosis and collapse of this manner arrives with *Mon Canard*, which readers of *Call It Thought* will find represented by about one fifth of its full extent. A chock-a-block sugar rush of MacSweeney, John Wieners and King’s nostalgia, an excerpt may be enough—take this mid-flow sample:

the NEW projective SHAG RUG with mess
 ages reigning dawn, Linnie’s bath blues at gatehouse adorn
 ding club, dessertion of my dissertation, PRESENT ’til end of Lime Rickey
 gives dark appearance for Coronation, O’ER wishes to be, forced
 to be teddy, sequestered quarters, resignation, dis
 appearances of the consorts of Kings, Gibbs good fea
 st, my NICK and my nor A, little yapping Aster, re
 marriage PROOF of the film with James Stewart, lunch
 with Kelly, what acknowledgement gives, my grateful Dis

Rodefer’s heart no longer seems to be in this. How many know or care that “FeaST” was an annual arts extravaganza at King’s, or that the Gibbs’ Building overlooks the Great Court? Here the limits of the pleasure of glossing may be reached; glossing becomes a grind of explanation rather than supplementary to the joys of the poem, and it is hard to summon the energy to discover which James Stewart movie or monarchical scion has been put in play. The play of “mess / ages reigning dawn” is worthy of *Four Lectures*, and its English aristocratic accent is spot-on; but the visible extensive and stanzaic resemblance of *Mon Canard* to *Four Lectures* invites a comparison much to the former work’s detriment. Here again is the stop-go pattern of early poems such as “Ode to the End”; after a magnificent invocation, stanza after stanza starts with an apostrophic push, seeking to sustain the momentum of desiring address, to

“put out delight before left leaves // e'er leaving left, ghost snogging readerless wacko.” That is a distressingly abject line. “Ghost snogging” might have elicited great lyric poetry from Thomas Hardy, but this is a poet who must take extreme measures to compel his own presence to himself, let alone a lover's—emergency measures, as the title of one of his collections has it. The rituals of corporal punishment are needed to regulate prosody and maintain address. “Arabesque at Bar” and “Beating Erasers” are properly relentless, while the stanzas of *Mon Canard* make their strike, fail to connect and then flail about like a porn addict desperately rummaging for the image that will concentrate rather than disperse desire. But a ghost cannot hold desire steady, and however bad a boy Stephen Rodefer would like to be, there is something fatally plaintive about such carry-on (we will not talk about “dignity”). The increasing recourse to the idioms of Barry MacSweeney and John Wieners, two poets whose programmatic derangement became irreversible, only serves to expose Rodefer's self-knowledge, his restlessly reflexive intelligence and his distractability, as a tragic impediment to the verse of *Mon Canard*. Preoccupied with disciplining himself into the delimited, definite, and apprehensible self of obsession, Rodefer repeatedly falls victim to linguistic shape-changing.

It is this perverse course set by exquisite distractability, a haunted ear and a tormenting memory, against the imperative to choke off all of that through excess, high discipline, or courted oblivion, which makes Rodefer's poetry fascinating even as it collapses. For Rodefer, the promiscuity of linguistic referentiality, while irresistible, is at the same time horrifying, a continuous affliction. While his contemporaries were either absorbed in creative play or breaking up the playground, essentially the same activity, Stephen Rodefer, like the Baudelaire he loves, sought to return the word to flesh: he would not consent to surf the mad allusiveness of language but would subject language to bounds wherein the loved one reigns and all the poet's votive ingenuity would be scorned and wasted. He believes such abjection to be the road back to the real, and when Rodefer spits at the avant-gardist in “Titular,” the impinger he yearns to see erased is the poet Rodefer, that bantam cock, that parrot, that cuckoo. This is what Rodefer was talking about in his otherwise bizarre “Preface” to *Four Lectures*, in which he refers to “tradition as borne: not only what speaks to us across time, but that which we drag along, what we lift into the picture as well as what by a differential operation we ‘unload.’” Rodefer feels language's plethora as a burden. While conceptualist poetry is just the latest way to jettison the burdens of history, a fantastic house in the exurbs free from property taxes, Rodefer understands that tradition is not amenable to optional stance, whether apparently radical or conservative. There is no New World division between popular culture and tradition, an obvious fact to attentive readers of O'Hara and Ashbery, but which Rodefer seems isolated among his American contemporaries in continuing to recognize and is

certainly peculiar in finding oppressive. Every gauche slogan, every earworm attaches itself to a previously benign strain. In unloading, Rodefer tries to get down and dirty where *eros* is and *thanatos* too, where total complication and merciless implication absolutely writhe and stink.

Several of the most recent poems in *Call It Thought*, collected under the heading “from How to Fall Off the Pony in New York” started out as bulletins posted on the “UK Poetry” listserv hosted by Miami University of Ohio. Such occasional verse might seek a desperate kind of breakthrough in treating this condition, through a re-attunement to Frank O’Hara’s most generously inclusive prosodic sweep—but where O’Hara sought distraction from an ever-shadowing anxiety, Rodefer yields himself gladly to a power that will defeat even *eros*. The epigraph to this section is very poignant:

*But what is fastened to the dying animal more
than the slow, unwilled, inexorable relinquishing
of eroticism—the spell spelt die Nacht, der Nicht,
die Nonne,
pricking on plane song
and surfing out beneath the surface unstopably
toward liberty*

So the death wish triumphs now, this undertow of surf’s inrush towards the final shore; this is death’s liberty, not the liberty of birth celebrated in O’Hara’s ode—the ode that resonates from first to last in this volume. The one tremendous poem of this last group is “Coughing Laughter Before Yawning Death,” where a final wave consists of transport planes bearing corpses from Iraq. Somehow death impregnates the army widows and bereaved girls: “their boyfriends arrive in the belly of their Hercules: / the new room flag-draped, a pine box, duly delivered and unloaded, bravely home.” Delivered and unloaded. In the end I am surprised to find the right word for the life’s work this book represents: it is brave.

John Wilkinson