

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 prions, 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.”



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, Lynnies 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