

of the central aesthetic struggles of twentieth-century poetry in English, the attempt to resolve the tension between closed and open forms. Koch admired the poems of William Carlos Williams for being so “odd and exciting;” they “catch the music of a man alive in his time.” Koch’s poems aspire to do the same, and more often than not they achieve that sound. It’s the sound of a man happy to be alive despite the world’s terrors, and who is awake to that feeling. I don’t think readers of poetry will ever tire of it; I suspect it will continue to convey something real about their own experience. It’s the sound of a man reaching into history without embarrassment or sense of piety, to draw forth whatever elements of poetic form are best suited to his occasions—from tight rhyming stanzas, to heroic couplets, to long and short free verse lines, to experimental serial structures—cheerfully ripping out the lining of yesterday’s attitudes and shaking off the lint of a persistent yet tired idiom. The spirit of poetry lives in Koch’s work, but we return to the work because it is alive with the spirit of Koch himself. If he started to write his first real poems by thwarting the expectations of literary convention in 1952, he continued to write into the twenty-first century by escaping the expectations of New York School poetics, in its tertiary generation.

I discovered Koch’s work late, in the mid-nineties, with the poem “One Train May Hide Another,” and the book from which it takes its name; finding the single volumes that preceded it, many of them out of print, was no small discovery. Whereas O’Hara and Ashbery were ubiquitous as the weather, Koch’s work seemed tough, resistant and alive, like a fish too big for the line. “Did you once ride in Kenneth’s machine?” Koch hears a voice ask beneath the great Atlantic Rainway; I feel as if I’ve never stepped off. “Your sureness is like the sun / While you have it,” he writes in “The Circus”; not that he never doubted (he doubts the worth of that very poem in the poem itself), but he never stopped believing, he said, that the poetry “shows me the life I want to go on having.” Koch had his life, with its great joys and muted sorrows, and made from it an art as interesting as the world we live in. Whatever kind of poetry we want to go on having, that it wouldn’t—or shouldn’t—include this robust and singular body of work is hard to imagine.

Joshua Weiner

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The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan. Edited by Alice Notley with Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 749pp. \$49.95

This is a story about a man who decided to be a poet. It took him ten years. First he met some other people who had decided to be poets and artists.

Then he taught himself how to write by stealing other poets' lines. Then, having learned how to write (and incidentally creating a literary movement) he decided to write a major poem. Having achieved these goals, he started over, seeking a new shapeliness for his poetry. All the while, he sought and found many unexpected answers to his main concern: the problem of how to live.

Ted Berrigan was born on November 15, 1934 in Providence, Rhode Island, a few months after his parents were married. He served briefly in Korea, then studied at the University of Tulsa on the GI Bill. In Tulsa, he fell in with, or, depending on who tells the story, took over, a group of teenagers publishing a literary journal, *The White Dove Review*, which was printing work by Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, and Jack Kerouac. Within a few years Berrigan and many of his younger friends (including Ron Padgett and Joe Brainard) had moved en masse to New York.

Berrigan believed that becoming a poet was as intense an undertaking as becoming a doctor:

Survival is the hardest test for a poet [...] now, you can do various other things for a living *and* write poetry, but it's very difficult to do anything else much in that six or seven years when you are trying to learn. When you are doing your pre-med and med school, you know, your internship, so to speak. I mean, those people don't work, do they, when they are doing that?

In New York, Berrigan supported himself by writing papers for undergraduates at Columbia. He read everything he could find, stealing books to read and then selling them for food and movie money. He wrote poems and composed a master's thesis on "The Problem of How to Live as Dealt with in Four Plays by George Bernard Shaw." One weekend he went to New Orleans, where he fell in love with and married a young woman named Sandra Alper. Her family disapproved and committed their daughter to a mental institution in Florida. Berrigan rescued her and, fleeing zigzag across the country, returned to New York. In the middle of this, he started writing, or as he put it, building, sonnets.

"I wanted to provide in *The Sonnets* a lot of material for footnotes so that scholars for one thousand years could check everything out," Berrigan once said, echoing Joyce. Scanning the annotations in the present edition, it's clear he was only half-joking. Alice Notley's introduction to the *Collected Poems* provides one of the best accounts of Berrigan's sources and methods (along with Padgett's "On *The Sonnets*" and Berrigan's "Sonnet Workshop"). Beyond Shakespeare, the work had various inspirations: William Carlos Williams's indictment of the form; Berrigan's discovery of Dadaist collage; Pound's *Can-*

tos; and Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. The notes—assembled by Notley and her two sons with Berrigan, Anselm and Edmund—illuminate many of the work's obscurities, from the “piercing pince-nez” (of Ezra Pound) and “dim frieze” (of Columbia's Butler Library) of the first sonnet through the *Tempest* allusion, O'Hara misprision, and private referents in the last of the seventy-nine poems.

While Berrigan's sonnets don't usually present the expected characteristics of the form (most notably rhyme), they do update the traditional expectation that the proposition in the first eight lines will be resolved in the last six. Berrigan's poems move rhetorically from descriptions of external phenomena in the octave to descriptions of internal noumena in the sestet. Throughout the sequence, he uses the volta, the turn from proposition to resolution, to shift momentum by disclosing the poem's autobiographical context at erratic intervals, creating a kind of pulp detective poetry.

The Sonnets can be, and certainly have been, read as an attempt to make the *Cantos* cohere, or as the strong precursor of Lyn Hejinian's recursive autobiography. But it's more in keeping with Berrigan's plagiarism-as-homage to see the work as a courtly exercise in personal canon formation. By the second poem in the sequence, he had begun quoting from John Ashbery, and quotations from and allusions to Ashbery, O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch pervade the work. Berrigan was a nimble thief who found new uses for the lines and processes he stole. From Ashbery's title “How Much Longer Shall I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher” he dropped the “Sepulcher” to introduce a kind of billboard in the middle of Sonnet II. From Koch's “You Were Wearing,” Berrigan chose a “John Greenleaf Whittier tie-clip,” and he turned Whittier into the running gag of Sonnet XXXI. And in Sonnet XXXVI, Berrigan's handily imitated O'Hara's I-do-this-I-do-that style:

It's 8:54 A.M. in Brooklyn it's the 28th of July and
it's probably 8:54 in Manhattan but I'm
in Brooklyn I'm eating English muffins and drinking
pepsi and I'm thinking of how Brooklyn is New
York city too how odd I usually think of it as
something all its own like Bellows Falls like Little
Chute like Uijongbu

I never thought on the Williams-
burg bridge I'd come so much to Brooklyn
just to see lawyers and cops who don't even carry
guns taking my wife away and bringing her back

No

and I never thought Dick would be back at Gude's
beard shaved off long hair cut and Carol reading
his books when we were playing cribbage and

watching the sun come up over the Navy Yard
across the river

I think I was thinking when I was
ahead I'd be somewhere like Perry street erudite
dazzling slim and badly loved
contemplating my new book of poems
to be printed in simple type on old brown paper
feminine marvelous and tough

In late winter 1963, while Berrigan was writing *The Sonnets*, his work drew the small notoriety of a censorship scandal. Padgett, an editor of Columbia's literary journal, gathered some of his friends' work, including three poems by Berrigan, for publication in the *Review*. Noticing the word *fuck* in the proofs, the publication's business manager alerted the Dean of Students, who, hypersensitive to appearances, passed the issue along to the already gray eminence Jacques Barzun. His pronouncement: the poems were "absolute trash." The administration gave the editors an ultimatum: withdraw the poems or be expelled. In response, Padgett and six others resigned from the journal and published the issue that April, by mimeograph, as *The Censored Review*. The story made the *New York Post*, Padgett appeared on the local TV news, and the 800-copy run of the review "sold out in about five minutes." Not one to let an opportunity pass, Berrigan started a mimeo of his own: *C* was printed monthly at first, on legal-sized paper, and distributed by mail to artists and writers the editors admired.

"FUCK COMMUNISM." Berrigan began "Tambourine Life" with yippie Paul Krassner's famous bumper sticker centered between the margins, the most visceral opening of any poem since *Beowulf*. A combination of otherworldly surliness and right-baiting obscenity, the line announces Berrigan's intention to capitalize on the attention he amassed in *The Sonnets*. He writes of "the snatches of virgins" and a character who "gets his gat and plugs his dad."

"What kind of person wrote this poem?" Berrigan asks. "That's really what you mean when you say who is speaking." In "Tambourine Life," Berrigan aims to make the answer as complicated and entertaining as possible. In the sixty-nine sections of "Tambourine Life," Berrigan's comic voice ranges from sarcasm to mock arrogance to deadpan absurdity, while his sincere plain-spoken voice is given over to adjectives such as *lovely*, *beautiful*, *marvelous*, and *great*. Oscillating between irony and sincerity in this way generates energy, a kind of alternating current of personal electromagnetism. The sections connect by an associative logic that is obvious in hindsight and impossible to anticipate. The section after "The Russian Revolution" opens with a line from a Patchen poem: "The apples are red again in Chandler's

valley.” In case the reader misses the connection, Berrigan riffs on the salient word: “redder for what happened there // never did know what it was / never did care.” And so it goes, as Berrigan develops the persona he hinted at in *The Sonnets*.

Released from the idealized self of *The Sonnets*, Berrigan writes memorably about subjects including love, Band-Aids, the code of the west, animals, children’s books, the incipient protest movement, sex, parenthood, poetry, money, more sex, and truth. Then, suddenly, death appears:

Now
in the middle of this
someone I love is dead

and I don’t even know
“how”

I thought she belonged to me

How she filled my life when I felt empty!

How she fills me now!

Just four sections from the end, these lines transform the poem’s giddy romp to an instantly sober, though no less electrified, *carpe diem*. This is the first of Berrigan’s many remarkable elegies: “Ann Arbor Elegy,” “Frank O’Hara,” “People Who Died,” “Memorial Day,” “Old-fashioned Air,” and “Last Poem.”

While the discoveries of *The Sonnets* influenced later poets mainly on the theoretical level, the technique of “Tambourine Life” appears to have had an immediate practical effect. Of the poem, Kenneth Koch wrote, “It seemed in a way ahead of everything—absolutely casual, ordinary, and momentary-seeming [...] full of buoyancy, sweetness, and high spirits.”

A masterpiece, though, can be a burden. In Berrigan’s case, the temptation to repeat the formula must have been constant. *Collected Poems* includes several variations on “Tambourine Life.” *Memorial Day*, a book-length elegiac poem written in collaboration with Anne Waldman, shares its episodic structure. The long sequence *Train Ride* accumulates its episodes over the course of a trip from New York to Providence, declaring “Out the Window / is / Out to Lunch!!” and “We could / bitch all our mutual / friends!!” The short, often terrific poems in Berrigan’s 1970 collection *In the Early Morning Rain* sometimes seem like disconnected sections of another “Tambourine Life”:

Someone who loves me calls me
 & I just sit, listening
Someone who likes me wires me
 to do something. I'll do it
Tomorrow.

Like the original, these later poems aim for pleasing shapes and statements, but the magic ratio of surliness to charm sometimes slips out of balance. The energy is off, and I suspect Berrigan knew it. He once said:

I'm not too interested in a collected works in which every poem is a totally terrific and wonderful masterpiece, 'cause that's inhuman. I like books in which every poem is a masterpiece. It's the John Ashbery way to try and have a book in which every poem is really outstanding and terrific. It's the Allen Ginsberg way not to worry about that, but to get in everything that you have around that time that is related and is above a certain level, that is, however fragmentary, or overdone, alive!

Like many poets then and now, Berrigan did stints teaching writing. (In order, he taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop—where he divorced Alper and married his student Notley—Michigan; Yale; Buffalo; Northeastern Illinois; Essex; Naropa; and the Stevens Institute of Technology.) Berrigan, however, didn't accept apprentices. As he pointed out in a talk at Naropa, "You can study under teachers, masters, add a little tradition to that word—but every individual has to make their own poems, their own story, make their own songs. You can't make perfect replicas of your master's works, so you flunk." The bodhisattva mode Berrigan embraced as pedagogy doesn't look likely to overturn the anxious correctional system Berrigan decried, at least not anytime soon. But changing the system single-handedly was probably never the goal; along with Krassner's "FUCK COMMUNISM," "Tambourine Life" also quotes Damon Runyon's "Get the money."

In her introduction, Notley mentions that the chief textual question she faced while assembling the *Collected Poems* was "what were we to do about the book-length sequence *Easter Monday*?" Written between 1972 and 1977, all the poems in the sequence appeared in print during Berrigan's lifetime, mainly in the collections *Red Wagon* and *Nothing for You*. Other poems appeared in various chapbooks. A series with the same title and bracket dates, but with a substantially different table of contents, is the next-to-last section of *So Going Around Cities* (1980). Berrigan did not settle on the final selection of forty-six poems until shortly before his death in 1983. Their appearance, in the *Collected Poems*, in this final arrangement is, along with the volume's excellent notes and introduction, the main reason readers ought to get their hands on the book immediately.

The *Easter Monday* poems have a character almost entirely different from anything else he wrote. A translation from Leopardi would appear to serve as their summary:

Your movements are really
Worth nothing nor is the world
Worth a sigh. Life is bitterness
And boredom; and that's all. The world's a mudhole.
It's about time you shut up.

There is no pull or push in these poems, no attempt to woo the reader or go for the laugh. *Easter Monday* is bleakly pure in its attention to ordinary life and the potential for despair, chaos, and anonymous death. A shot rings out in the third line of the first poem. The third poem ends with “cancer of the spine,” the fourth with “And I’m the man who killed him.” “Old-fashioned Air” ends with “And we are back where we started from, Lee, you & me, alive & well!” The poem was written, the notes reveal, after Berrigan learned of his friend Lee Crabtree’s suicide.

If *The Sonnets* and “Tambourine Life” are bids for literary posterity and popular appeal, *Easter Monday* is born of spiritual ambition. Berrigan has stopped seeking approval. He has let go of his anxiety about what he expected of his life and his poetry:

God lies down

Here. Rattling of a shot, heard
From the first row. The president of the United States
And the Director of the FBI stand over
a dead mule. “Yes, it is nice to hear the fountain
With the green trees around it, as well as
People who need me.” Quote Lovers of speech unquote. It’s a nice thought
& typical of a rat. And, it is far more elaborate
Than expected. And the thing is, we don’t *need that* much money.

Berrigan, remarried and a new father again, honored his responsibilities (“People who need me”) by setting achievable goals and clearing out the unnecessary—the unnecessary, in this case, being the enormous public persona (equal parts W.C. Fields and W.B. Yeats, as one friend put it) that he spent the previous decade assembling. That persona returns at the end of the sequence, in the anthology piece “Whitman in Black,” only after Berrigan has purged all attempts to entertain and impress. In “Newtown,” “The Ideal Family awaits distribution on / The Planet.” “Swinburne & Watts-Dunton” is a semi-opaque account of steering himself back from dissolution, “Soviet Souvenir” an anxious reckoning with love. The renunciations culminated in “Narragansett Park,” the first poem in the series written at 101 St. Mark’s

Place, Berrigan's last residence in New York:

The major planets are shifting (shivering?) but out of my natural habit,
Self-kindness,
 I play them
something Nashville something quality
and there is the too easy knell of the games chapel
The tempting scornful opposite
Cathedral virus and goof immunization:
The curves of the Spirit are not very interested in the conquest of matter.
Color is the idiot's delight. I'm the curves, what's the matter? or
I'm the matter, the curves nag:
Call it Amber, it doesn't ride nor take to rider
Amber it doesn't make me want to pray, it makes me see color
as we fail to break through our clasped hands.

The whole is marked by the excitement and frustration of a working mind. Berrigan takes solace in the intimacy of "self-kindness" and "clasped hands," abandoning modernism's preoccupation with ideas and things for something like no feelings but in choices.

For Berrigan, the art of living was not a matter of extending the greatest average happiness over the longest possible lifespan (moral miserism). Rather, it was a matter of living in his feelings and those of everyone around him—of approaching as much and as often as possible a pure excited state in which a thing noticed becomes not a new toy but part of the furniture, equipment for living. What this meant for his poetics was that a line had to maintain a relation to the lines around it, as if the lines themselves were in conversation. A good line could be expected to recur in other conversations, sometimes as a reproach, sometimes as a remembrance, and sometimes just as a sound.

Jordan Davis

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Ange Mlinko. *Starred Wire*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2005. 64pp. \$15

You'd think Ange Mlinko would grow weary of comparisons with New York School poets. *Publishers Weekly*, in its review of the present volume, lauds her "Frank O'Hara-inspired verve," which is probably related to "the clear-eyed big-heartedness of Frank O'Hara" the same journal discerned at work in Mlinko's debut, *Matinees*. *The Believer* ups the belle-lettristic ante: where *Matinees* betrayed "a faux-slapdash, sociable concentration very, very close to Frank O'Hara's," the new book is "half John Ashbery, half Harriet the Spy."