*The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch.* New York: Knopf, 2005. 761pp. $40

Of the three kings most identified with the New York School of Poets, Kenneth Koch is the least heralded. While his status as a celebrity teacher for several generations at Columbia shows the reach of his influence, one feels that O'Hara and Ashbery have marked the fabrics of contemporary American poetry more indelibly, that their influence has bled through more layers. It may be that Koch's new-fangled egotistical sublime is, in the end, more his own, and thus less easily imitated than the porous selflessness of O'Hara and Ashbery. Or that Koch's formal accomplishments cut a path aspirants would need years of personal practice to cut again, while the avenues of O'Hara and Ashbery's cool and shadowed mystery now seem permanently cleared and accessible. Whatever the case may be—and it's a curious one, having as much to do with the vicissitudes and capriciousness of literary and artistic society as it does with aesthetic, formal innovations—a career-spanning view of Koch's oeuvre is now, four years after his death, available in this collection of his shorter poems.

But what does New York School mean in 2006? What was *New York School* but a publicity ploy concocted in 1961 by John Myers, the New York gallery director: the branding already existing for a group of painters, it was simple enough to share it with another coterie product. Modern poetry is rife with such branding, and the invention of literary movements has long suggested the American avant-garde as the backside of a Madison Avenue currency called *What's New.*

What was new about these poets in the early 1950s was their use of accident and play in their spirited disregard for the decorum of refined diction, high-flown syntax, traditional symbology, and elevated abstraction—all the elements that contributed to the serious meatloaf of the mid-century lyric.

Here is "Sun Out," the first poem in Koch's *Collected,* from that period:

Bananas, piers, limericks,
I am postures
Over there, I, are
The lakes of delection
Sea, sea you! Mars and win-
Some buffalo
They thinly raft the plain,
Common do

It ice-floes, hit-and-run drivers,
The mass of wind.
Is that snow
H-ing at the door? And we
Come in the buckle, a
Vanquished distinguished
Secret festival, relieving flights
Of the black brave ocean.

The tassels of poetic convention circa 1955 have come undone here, left in tatters. The short list that opens the poem makes a couple of typical early Kochian moves: the slapstick banana followed by an unrelated "pier" that nonetheless makes the sound of another fruit (pear), thus at once evoking a logic further unsettled by the "limerick" that ends the line. (Is there a form that mocks the metaphysical anxiety of modernism more flamboyantly than the limerick?) "I am postures / Over there, I, are / The lakes of delection / Sea, sea you!"—such a line of scrambled code suggests, perhaps, something about Koch's previous year in France; the way, he writes in a preface, that the French language was one he "understood and misunderstood at the same time. Words would have several meanings at once. […] The pleasure—and the sense of new meanings—I got from this happy confusion was something I wanted to recreate in English."

Confusion, of course, is precisely the condition of meaning that the conventions of mid-century formalism hoped to combat in their struggle against cultural dissolution. Dissolution—and not mere ambiguity—is a condition that Koch hopes to engender. A Koch poem is a slippery semantic field of puns, parodic snippets, homonyms, fractured syntax, and jarring juxtapositions. The martial ambitions of Mars in the poem above, to win all battles, makes the macho word-fragment, "win," flower as it crosses the line into the sweet, cheerful "winsome," an absurd adjective for a buffalo. Fragments of grandly ridiculous rhetoric ("they thinly raft the plain") inflate the comedy further. The poem is not, however, simply a parody of poetic posturing; it's driven by an essential pleasure principle—to concoct a sequence of word-tastes in the mouth. "Vanquished distinguished / Secret festival, relieving flights / Of the black brave ocean": leash rhyme (—quished / —guished), the play of long and short vowel sounds, and the pulsing cadence that clusters at the end with alliterative amplification—Koch is not making fun of poetry; he's making *fun* of poetry. The sun is out, the ice floes of formal and linguistic convention are melting, and the poem makes a new figure, a "secret festival" open to everyone.

"Your Fun Is a Snob," Koch titles an early poem, a challenge to the whole literary establishment circa 1953. And Koch—New York's "Doctor Fun" (so dubbed by Ashbery)—wished to inoculate the whole population

against third-hand postures of solemnity. Koch's own prescription couldn't be clearer than the voice of Ingelil, the character of the young Swedish nurse in his early verse play "The Merry Stones": "May the blue star of yesterday pink its liberal summit to that head, this you, like a revolvement, fats the walls with lowing circumvention. Oh, goodbye, normal!"

"The whole idea of writing poetry had a lot to do with escaping," Koch told an audience in 1994. The circumvention of social norms and expectations of Cincinnati, where Koch grew up in the late 1920s and 30s, elided with this later impulse to escape compositional expectations of any kind. The first expectation he thwarted as a poet was that of depth, unlike his contemporary, Allen Ginsberg, whose "Howl" sounded a protest, in part, against fashion and superficiality. In a testy 1978 interview, Ginsberg pressed Koch about the Buddhist wisdom he heard in Koch's play, *The Red Robin,* which ran for three weeks at St. Clement's theater in New York. Koch replied (recalling Andy Warhol's famous assertion): "I think you have a tendency to look for meaning beneath the surface of my work, whereas the meaning is really that surface." That surface, however, is varied, seductive, beguiling. "But even every surface gets hot / In the sun," he writes in a poem from *A Possible World,* his final volume.

Reading through the *Collected Poems,* one is struck by the sheer variety of formal deployments and stylistic mimicry—he can sound like any poet from the canon and can perform any technical effect. But if he can sound like anyone, and *do* anything, what makes him an essential poet, not merely a virtuoso capable of producing pleasurable effects? What does Koch's work tell us about what happened in American culture in the second half of the twentieth century?

Koch worked in two basic modes that appear mutually exclusive, yet come together to form a vigorous polyphonic style of great flexibility and charm. The first mode—of fragmented, joyous confusion—is best exemplified in his early long poem "When the Sun Tries to Go On" (not included in the book under review, but forthcoming in the subsequent volume from Knopf, gathering up the long poems). Koch claims *War and Peace,* which he had recently finished, as an invisible influence, specifically Tolstoy's "way of seemingly including everything imaginable."

"When the Sun Tries to Go On" opens mid-sentence, like Pound's *Cantos*; only the sea on which Koch embarks is of a different heroic motion, the epic of everyday objects swirling amongst literary scrap wood and milkyways of diction, swaths of glowing particles syntactically adrift:

> And with a shout, collecting coat hangers
> Dour rebus, conch, hip,
> Ham, the autumn day, oh how genuine!

Literary frog, catch-all boxer, O
Real! The magistrate, say "group," bower, undies
Disk, poop, *Timon of Athens.* When
The bugle shimmies, how glove towns!
It's Merrimac, bends, and pure gymnasium
Impy keels!

"When the Sun Tries to Go On" showcases most dramatically (at 2400 lines) the early Kochian oxymoron of style, a radiant opacity; yet by the early 1960s, Koch's language was opening, becoming available through the use of a more standard syntax. One hears Koch leaving the entangled fields of radical *parole in libertà* to adopt a mode that actually allows him to convey the happy zaniness of a mind inventing at what appears to be very high speed.

Is the basketball coach a homosexual lemon manufacturer? It is suspected by
O'Ryan in his submarine.
When I was a child we always cried to be driven for a ride in that submarine.
Daddy would say Yes!
Mommy would say No! The maid read *Anna Karenina* and told us secrets.
Some suspected her of a liaison with O'Ryan. Nothing but squirrels
Seemed to be her interest, at the windows, except on holidays, like Easter and
Thanksgiving, when
She would leave the basement and rave among the leaves, shouting, I am the
Spirit of softball! Come to me!

Koch discovers in these poems that he can do more with language and form if he steps back from absolute disruption; that his penchant for whacked-out story-telling, comic meditation, and lyric mania relies on *stretching* the conventions, much as R. Crumb did with his comics. Abstraction is too constraining. The fun is in adopting the principles of representation and reference, and distorting them by playing with expectations. You learn this from Byron, not Marinetti.

By the 1970s Koch's work developed further by adopting a verbal transparency that delights in rhetorical peregrinations and associational argument.

If you do not have money, you must probably earn some
But do it in a way that is pleasant and does
Not take too much time. Painting ridiculous pictures
Is one good way, and giving lectures about yourself is another.
I once had the idea of importing tropical birds
From Africa to America, but the test cage of birds
All died on the ship, so I was unable to become
Rich that way. Another scheme I had was
To translate some songs from French into English, but

No one wanted to sing them. Living outside Florence
In February, March, and April was an excellent idea
For me, and may be for you, although I recently revisited
The place where I lived, and it is now more "built up";
Still, a little bit further out, it is not, and the fruit trees
There seem the most beautiful in the world. Every day
A new flower would appear in the garden, or every other day,
And I was able to put all this in what I wrote. I let
The weather and the landscape be narrative in me.
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Be attentive to your dreams. They are usually about sex,
But they deal with other things as well in an indirect fashion
And contain information that you should have.
You should also read poetry. Do not eat too many bananas.

The last thing New York School will ever be accused of is aspiring to the condition of wisdom literature; yet "Some General Instructions" flirts with just such an ambition. This is Koch finding a voice for poetry in his employment as university professor. An unpromising premise: pedantry so quickly invites mockery. But Koch is a self-conscious Polonious here, although of ambiguous intent: Is he making fun of giving advice by making the advice impossible to accept, or does he mean it? Yes and yes. Koch is the great poet of Yes! Our crazy Troubadour from virtual Languedoc. Some of the advice is obvious, some impossible to accept, some worth remembering. "I let the weather and the landscape be narrative in me"—such a sentence is positively grand; it sounds worthy of Cézanne, noble, provocative, an imaginative seed ready to bear great fruit. On the other hand, "You should also read poetry" is a tautology that undoes the entire occasion (we can't take the advice unless we are *already* reading poetry).

While this uncertainty of tone is also characteristic of Ashbery and O'Hara, Koch's poems convey a quintessential American openness. Koch does not reside on the underside of his phrasing. Even an ironic-sounding line—"You should also read poetry. Do not eat too many bananas"—achieves its main effect not through irony but from the pure comedy of contrast (between reading poetry and eating bananas) and the quick shift from a positively charged imperative (you should) to a negative one (do not). Koch is not suggesting the opposite or inverse of what he "says"—one really should not eat too many bananas. But who ever does?

Koch's poems show no ambition to critique by way of irony the obvious and pernicious systems of power that make civilization possible as well as exploitative; his poems seek, rather, to induce in the reader a state of happiness that serves, in the largest sense, as a criticism of life.

> Beauty is sometimes personified
> As a beautiful woman, and this personification is satisfying
> In that, probably, of all the beautiful things one sees
> A beautiful person is the most inspiring, because, in looking at her,
> One is swept by desires, as the sails are swept in the bay, and when the body
> is excited
> Beauty is more evident, whether one is awake or asleep.

The argument in "On Beauty" is not at all obvious, yet Koch's discursive mode is absolutely clear, with a kind of classical balance reinforced by a lineation co-extensive with the grammatical clause: such lines are not simply randomly lineated prose, however; much of their nuanced art lies in the controlled release of information, a kind of control one finds in good prose, yes, but accentuated here by verse movement. Koch's hand is firm but his touch is light. And there is something particularly pleasing, surprising, humorous, and true in the arrival of the final clause of this sentence, that posits what is most evident to us we often discover in our dreams.

Koch's mature mode, I think you could call it, combines the first—of fragmented, forcefully juxtaposed phrases and irrational word sequences—with a second, discursive, narrative and didactic mode, the mode of logical development, however many shifts and swerves it makes; the result is one of Koch's most consistent and endearing qualities, the way he uses parody and pastiche as a form of sincerity, as if Rufus T. Firefly and Whitman had collaborated on a new kind of poem.

One of Koch's funniest poems is a fake anthology of South American poets that he wrote in the late nineteen-sixties, at a time when Robert Bly and others were introducing the work of South American poets to US readers. The "translations" form a set of stylistic pratfalls, from clunky rhyming abstractions and "deep" images ("Now a drumstick of night, / Two Indians on a highway— / One stricter than a feather, / The other, clasped by might") to long passive prosaic lines of exploded pomp ("At the Cabana Ailanthus when night breezes are stilled / One old commonwealth teacher remains fastened to his desk. / Through the night come the sounds of the frog / As if someone, or as if an entire people, had learned a Romance language.") Koch's own expansiveness, the speed of his appropriations, his inclusiveness and the range of his materials, suggests a willed recklessness. But parody, as a form of light verse, requires absolute precision if it's to come off with any effect, and Koch's parodies are funny. They also serve as a source for his best work.

The fake nineteenth-century South American poet, Jorge Guinhieme, for example, writes a poem, "Boiling Water," that Koch renders in a comically awkward translation; Koch later takes the title for one of his most daring

performances, “The Boiling Water” (from the late 1970s), a meditation that begins with the literal moment rather than the lame allegory of his false forebear:

> A serious moment for the water is when it boils
> And though one usually regards it merely as a convenience
> To have the boiling water available for bath or table
> Occasionally there is someone around who understands
> The importance of the moment for the water—maybe a saint,
> Maybe a poet, maybe a crazy man, or just someone temporarily disturbed
> With his mind “floating,” in a sense, away from his deepest
> Personal concerns to more “unreal” things. A lot of poetry
> Can come from perceptions of this kind, as well as a lot of insane
> conversations.

The poem succeeds as the parody does, by taking up an unpromising premise; yet it never shifts into parody. Rather it boldly champions its occasion, a serious moment when something begins to happen, to change—as our feelings change as we fall in love.

One finds an even more dramatic example in how, twenty-five years after he spins the bogus poetics of Argentinean “Hasosismo”—“the art of concealing in one line what has been revealed in the previous line”—Koch uses the same notion to begin one of his most inventive and charming poems, “One Train May Hide Another”:

> In a poem, one line may hide another line,
> As at a crossing, one train may hide another train.
> That is, if you are waiting to cross
> The tracks, wait to do it for one moment at
> Least after the train is gone. And so when you read
> Wait until you have read the next line—
> Then it is safe to go on reading.

The poem proceeds to suggest how all the phenomena of the world are concealed behind themselves; it’s not that surfaces are peeled away to reveal further surfaces, but that everything is connected, and that the connections between things constantly come to light, if only one has the patience to keep looking. (Could Ginsberg have been right about the Buddhism?)

In the later books—*Days and Nights* (1982), *One Train* (1994), *Straits* (1998), *New Addresses* (2000), and *A Possible World* (2002)—Koch became a great poet of memory, his strongest memory the feeling of how great it was to be the poet of the earlier books. Yet his elegiac mood is buoyant, never mordant; his later poems draw from the source of energy even as they find the language to acknowledge its setting:

Those were the days
When there was so much energy in and around me
I could take it off and put it back on, like clothes
That one has bought only for a ski trip
But then finds that one is using every day
Because every day is like a ski trip—
I think that's how I was at twenty-three.

My favorite poem in this key is "Bel Canto," which opens Koch's final volume, *A Possible World.*

To be in all those places where I tarried
Too little or too late or bright and early,
To love again the first woman I married,
To marvel at such things as melancholy,
Sophistication, drums, a baby carriage,
A John Cage concert heard at Alice Tully—
How my desire, when young to be a poet
Made me attentive and oblivious every moment!

The ease of Koch's formal skill, his limitless powers of impression (in this case, of Keats), his restless gathering of disparate experiences, directness of treatment and refusal to psychologize—all are on full display here.

If Koch is a wonderful poet, even a masterful one, the question remains, is he an important poet? Does he have a role as an artist in the development of American poetry; or is he more the elaborately talented poetry-writing friend who became an academic, a supporting character in an historical play about some other poets of significance, titled *New York School?* If importance is measured by influence, and influence by discernible imitation, then Koch's present significance is muted. And yet when I dip into his poems, or plunge, they seem to draw continuously from the freshest coldest source, while Ashbery now seems brackish and O'Hara depleted. Those who keep their distance from Koch's work complain of its pastiche and loquaciousness, its irrepressible insistence to keep on running. But forty years out it remains remarkably clean of mannerism—no tired moves, no overplayed riffs, no self-invented clichés. The master of parody, pastiche, and formal adaptation remains parody-proof, inimitable, entirely himself: "Fresh paint! / Unpasteurized milk!" Koch embodies with more kinaesthetic joy than any poet of his immediate milieu the paradox of how new art thrives in the refracted light of a tradition. Tennis without a net? He can play the game in outer space as winningly as in a suitcase.

As does the work of other poets associated with the New York School, the influence of which is so prominent, Koch's poems vividly animate one

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 AM. 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

§

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 cleareyed 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."

*The New Yorker* restrains itself to noting that Mlinko is obviously influenced by "the conversational, paratactic style of Frank O'Hara." Ron Silliman strikes the inevitable meta-note by observing that *Starred Wire*'s "back cover hollers 'New Yawk School, New Yawk School,'" and furthermore that "if you like the poetry of the New York School, you're going to feel completely at home with Ange Mlinko." The back cover in question sports blurbs from John Ashbery and Charles North, while Bob Holman, who chose the volume for the National Poetry Series, manages in his encomium to name-check Ashbery, O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Alice Notley, Barbara Guest, Bernadette Mayer, and Ron Padgett. I presume he ran out of space before he could get to Ted Berrigan.

What is strange about all this isn't that it's inaccurate—one look at Mlinko's poems confirms their affinities—nor even that Mlinko, far from being tired of the comparison, embraces it, proudly declaring herself "a New York School poet" on her blog, but that the New York School should have produced an aesthetic that, well into its sixth decade, continues to inspire an exuberant and honorably derivative poetics. It is hard to imagine that a young poet proclaiming herself a Beat or SF Renaissance poet at this late date would be met with anything but ridicule. But Mlinko has mastered her predecessors' styles "from highlight to crosshatch, in the Aeolian distances, / amid such gypsies as one becomes in the true illusion" of a successfully negotiated agon. If *Starred Wire* retains the deceptively casual register of Mlinko's first book, it is also more adventurous and more finely wrought than *Matinees*. Many poems work expert changes on contemporary poetry's marriage of lyricism and near-cartoonish abstraction, made the more beguiling by what seems at first to be an easy play of surfaces:

> Meanwhile the music
> strobes so rapidly it uncoils in understanding, not time,
> adrift in technical registers holding relations in light patterns
> all the night till morning's mimosas under blue sky embowering
> our nicer noise to a gold-stringed noon acoustic.

Where one suspects pointless wordplay ("It exercises cerise"), one is advised to keep reading, as lines adrift in technical registers ("Even the Baroque gets lost in it") reveal relations that uncoil as contemplation yields to understanding:

> Recalling the equations derived for ballistics—
> aiming cannonballs is not like squaring lintels,
>
> and skyscrapers are all lintel.
> There isn't a straight line among all these that never meet;
>
> I will write away for it.

An argumentative impulse belies the clever surface pleasures of most of these poems. "Keys & Scales" turns out to be about maps, not music, but the pun is purposeful, and the tropes meet in the final couplet, in which the metaphorical engines of cognitive mapping and actual mapmaking are made musically cognate: "The wilderness took shape; the stars were of where / Two had met, in honeydew shadow, and made maps praise." Wonderfully unlikely turns of phrase appear like bits of brilliant but nonchalant cocktail conversation: "The buffalo of philosophy"; "a jaw of pines and water towers"; "Day is a fine discrimination to get away with / lipreading through the moving leaves"; "Schoolkids jumping the jellyfish fences / Wearing cranberry jackets / Through the paisley briars and stars / In starred wire."

In the midst of such quasi-surreal pyrotechnics one might find a showstopping rightness of perception, as in the final couplet of "Everything's Carousing":

> Sparrows petulantly, like petals, adding subtracting
> to crumb-strewn café tables, then boarding the ferries.

Where another poet might take a whole stanza to describe the frenetic, absorbed, graceful hopping of sparrows, half-flying from ground to tabletop and back again, Mlinko nails it with four repeated consonants and the judicious omission of a comma. "I was trying to describe the perfect library," she writes at the end of "Poetry as Scholarship," "when I remembered that all you need to know is its etymology, rallying place." Mlinko has a facility that seems intuitive but must be the product of long study: "It's the sort of weather Tybalt murdered Mercutio in." "In January there isn't the same participation. / The tree that was lit up is dark." "Today we'll see, wild epiphenomenon, how to stay under the sky."

If there is a problem with the book, it is its occasional willingness to loaf at the post-avant doorpost. The lazily conventional intrudes, and one could be reading any poem printed in *Fence:* "Dear Soho. Dear Sappho. Dear Orpheus. Dear Silenus. / Dear King Midas. No, dear Soho"; "A sick manager, mammal, Malthusian / induced to become a patriarch, patricide." Such lines will be familiar from any number of contemporary journals catering to a period style of forced ellipsis and levity, whose practitioners can seem to write solely in order to flout the potentialities of pathos, as if genuine feeling or intellection in a poem were enough to earn one the opprobrium associated with confessional poetry. Underlying this aesthetic is the unfortunate assumption that there exist two warring camps in English-language poetry—but, to quote Ghostface Killah, it don't have to be this way. Many of the most intriguing poets now at work seem to perform something like the "double refusal" Pierre Bourdieu diagnosed in "Flaubert's Point of View." Merrill

Gilfillan's quietly experimental poems, for instance, provide reasons not to believe poetry in English is irredeemably Manichean, beholden either to the Language school or to epiphanies involving deer. Jennifer Moxley, Donald Revell, C.D. Wright, and Forrest Gander come to mind as well. And Ange Mlinko, despite her lapses into the sort of chatty patter that infests so many hip journals, can bring us to that necessary point where a cricket is thrown out of a house "like rain bounced off a small false roof / over the spiral volutes of its capitals"—where, that is, our "view of the sweet / hypoglycemic across the street" unoccluded, our interest in "precise correlatives to describe the randomness of the universe" might be sustained long enough for us not to mind that we will never find them.

Michael Robbins

§

Howard Akler, *The City Man*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2005. 154pp. $14.95

Because the *Chicago Review* is a serious publication, given to sober criticism and averse to fawning blurbs, I feel bound to reveal straight away that *The City Man* contains a simile that strains my objectivity. Toronto, 1934: pickpocket Mona Kantor, trailing a mark through Union Station, watches the back of the sucker's head and finds "His yarmulke askew like a large lazy eye." Consider yourself warned.

In games of word association, the utterance of the word "Toronto" is answered inevitably, instantaneously, with the cry "Rhythm!"

This claim does not seem so far-fetched in the world of *The City Man*, a spare, episodic first novel from Howard Akler. Pickpockets, hustlers, touts, and grifters ease through Toronto's Depression-era streets, their speech as deft as their fingers and feet. Good timing here is not just a tool for conning bateses, pinching pokes, scoring pits. It's a sign of a sensibility, a kind of knowingness. Characters with rhythm of movement or language see and sense things to which other Torontonians, lazy-eyed suckers all, are oblivious.

In the manner of its characters' clipped but rhythmic speech, Akler's third-person narration taps out an easy patter, often in imagistic sentence fragments. Parts of speech are rationed in the downtrodden city, forcing readers to fill in blanks—pronouns, verbs, articles—the way impoverished citizens patch their suits.

Mona, our grifter heroine, has the most preternaturally perfect timing in the novel. She is a stall: that half of a pickpocketing duo responsible for

manoeuvering the mark into position through imperceptible nudging and blocking. Once the victim has been set up, stalled for the subtlest instant, the cannon moves in to pull the touch, reef an easy kick. (Provided no one crumbs the play.) The argot and choreography of the pickpocket or "the whiz" do not penetrate the dull senses of upright citizens; as one grifter puts it to a reporter, "We can kibbitz right there in front of the sucker and he don't even notice."

Eli Morenz is the *Toronto Star*'s city man. In addition to his ear for puns, Eli has a feel for the pace of an interview that's as keen as Mona's sense of the whiz. He extracts information with deft nonchalance—never rumbles a bates. Eli is the only Torontonian who experiences Mona's genius as anything other than an inexplicably empty pocket.

Making strategic use of an incriminating photo of her taken by a *Star* photographer, Eli induces Mona to instruct him in the art of the grift. In their first class, she trails him around his tiny apartment, picking his delighted pocket again and again. ("Eli feels nothing but her eyes.") In a subsequent session, she forks over the grifter lexicon:

> Bang a souper?
> Steal a pocket-watch.
> Good, says Mona. Keister kick?
> Uh. Hip pocket.
> The dipsy?
> A warrant.
> Centre britch?
> Eli flushes. Uh, he says.
> Come on come on.
> Well, the space between the left britch and the right britch.
> The cock, says Mona.
> Right. Cock.
> You're catching on. How about raust?
> Um, says Eli.
> Mona jabs his hand with the lit end of her cigarette.
> Ow! What was that for?
> An example, says Mona. A raust is misdirection.

Her lessons—the less interesting ones, anyway—he publishes in the *Star*, giving the readers/suckers a glimpse of the (under)world they fail to notice. As the quoted passage suggests, the intersection of the economies in which Mona and Eli respectively specialize—of cash and information—is flirtatious. Eli's pocket is happily plundered; Mona hands over her secrets under the most flattering duress. It doesn't take long for a third economy to spring up:

> Her hand steals away from the small of his back. Lolls along the thigh. Fingers his asshole.

> Uh, says Eli. That's not my pocket, you know.
> Who's the grifter, chum?

The Hays Code, applied in the United States in 1934, prescribed moral principles for filmmaking. Among these was the instruction that "the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin." Unregulated pulp magazines and paperback originals, however, were able to throw the sympathy of the audience wherever might yield the greatest entertainment. During the Depression, as noir fiction grew out of the hard-boiled detective genre, the criminals, with their moneymaking schemes and their unapologetic sex lives, took center stage—edging out police detectives, private eyes, and newsmen.

If noir fiction is defined in part by the extent to which readers enjoy its criminals, Mona and her gang of (mostly) lovable grifter associates, who drink and gossip at a friendly speakeasy near Kensington Market, paint *The City Man* decidedly noir. Fact-finding Eli bears traces of a more hard-boiled world. But as the novel begins the newsman has just returned to Toronto from a mental-health leave up north ("the depressed man returns to the depressed city"); Eli's yolk would be no match for even a lightly toasted crust. His softness, though not so runny as to seem contemporary, nevertheless keeps him from being a straight shoeleather hero.

Eli's role, unlike that of the typical hard-boiled newsman, is not to unravel the mystery of the grifters. His job is to ration out choice morsels of their story to a curious public. Even more curious than the public, it turns out, are the police, whose failure to apprehend the pickpockets becomes increasingly embarrassing with every article the *Star* prints. (As to whether there is any rhythm-savvy detective who might break the case himself, we learn everything we need to know when we are first introduced to The Law in the form of the Police Fife and Drum Band, clomping around a parade ground pounding out a lumpy and discordant "Vimy Ridge.")

One question of the unfolding novel is whether Eli will furnish the police with the incriminating information they seek. A fellow reporter sums it up: "If you can do that, Morenz, you've got the makings of a real dick in you." Our sympathies having been thrown vigorously toward Mona and her crime, wrongdoing, evil, and sin, we are free to read the final line as devoid of period slang.

In addition to its well-written criminals, *The City Man* offers an extra cause to hope that Eli will not cooperate too enthusiastically with the police. As we listen in on the whiz mob at their preferred speak, it becomes clear that Toronto's 1930s underworld features, like some legitimate economies, a horizontal division of labour, organized tribally. Here, for example, is a

friend counseling Mona to avoid outsiders (and find herself a nice Jewish pickpocket):

> You know what I always say, honey: the other rackets are plain trouble. Remember that sap man you hooked up with? What was his name?
>
> Markson.
>
> Right, Markson. What a bozo. And that goyish card player?
>
> Robison.
>
> Geez, honey, see what I'm saying? Stick with the whiz. You can't beat a man with good hands.

It's not that Jewishness and criminality are overlaid. Robison, Markson, and "Dago Joe" are all working their own illicit angles, and the police staff sergeant bemoans his growing PR problem with a weary "Feh." But we happen to find Mona and her associates at the intersection of these two outsider identities—grifter and Jew—in Toronto the Good in 1934. It is hard to dismiss the hunch that, if apprehended, the grifters' liabilities might number more than ten quick fingers.

The story is set less than a year after the Christie Pits riots of August, 1933, perhaps Toronto's most bombastic display of anti-Semitism. (A brawl erupted at a baseball game after a homemade swastika flag was trotted out near the ballpark. The riots were preceded by months of smaller incidents and a long campaign on the part of some residents to have Jews banned from city beaches.) Subtle in this as in much else, *The City Man* conjures the ambient anti-Semitism of its time and place—just enough to evoke a quiet menace that may at any given moment come to nothing, or fly its livid colors.

The grifters move among more upright citizens, knowing better than the suckers themselves how to dress, move, and behave in order to look average. Mona's cannon partner Chesler reflects that his suit and tie "give him a sucker's anonymity."

For his part, Eli gets his first big lead on the whiz from a bartender named Little Freddie who tells him he should look out for a "Jew mob." Little Freddie explains his uncharacteristic generosity: "Normally that info'd cost. But I hate the mockies." "Oh," Eli replies. Passing: you don't have to be griftish.

Canadian literature's hard-dying emphasis on wilderness, rural life, and regional peculiarities has yielded its own good things. If Alice Munro's literary powers are sufficient to induce New York and London to visit Wingham, Ontario, on occasion, let no one scoff or sniff. Moreover, the days when the standard-issue Canadian novel must contain a supporting cast of jack pines, black bears, and Precambrian Shield are long gone.

Even so, the *Survival* tradition has left writing about the Canadian city with plenty of dead storefronts to populate. While Russell Smith, Douglas

Coupland, Michael Turner, and others have filled in some contemporary blanks, the fiction of Canada's urban history is not as plentiful as it might be. In this regard the likes of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, Hugh Garner's *Cabbagetown*, Mordechai Richler's stories of mid-century Montreal, and Wayson Choy's and Joy Kogawa's haunted Vancouver remain rare objects.

Howard Akler has conjured a Toronto I am very glad to have visited. In addition to its many formal pleasures—not least of which are its treasure chest of 30s slang and its playful, perfect synecdoches—*The City Man* is an admirable contribution to the story of the city it so clearly loves.

Amy Langstaff

§

## John Taggart, *Crosses*. London: Stop Press, 2006. 180pp. $18

John Taggart's *Crosses* takes its epigraph from Kafka's *Blue Octavo Notebooks:* "The fact that there is nothing but a spiritual world deprives us of hope and gives us certainty." We expect epigraphs to orient; this one provokes. In the pages that follow, which collect poems from 1992 to 1998, Taggart presents a sustained meditation on the relations between transcendence and immanence. *Crosses* names more than just the book's twenty-eight-page centerpiece: the crossings of spirit and matter, light and materiality, are Taggart's central concerns. For Kafka's line demands the question: what space does "nothing but a spiritual world" leave for corporeal existence?

Taggart speaks to this question without ever answering it. *Crosses* is the darkest of his books, and the tension of dwelling at the junction of the material and the spiritual determines its agonized tone. Passages at once grotesque and pastoral present wounded bodies in devastated expanses, mephitic gardens littered with rotting fruit, suffering brides with putrescent wombs, and "bones a sheep skull or two beer cans in the dirt." Blood saturates this book; a "guilty stain" imbues its pages.

But Taggart's crosses are not only machines of torture, they are also means of discipline, *modes* as well as objects of attention. His sanguinary meditations serve an ascetic spiritual practice: for Taggart, like Simone Weil, contemplation amounts to participation in the crucifixion. "Composition is attention," Taggart has written, and the attitude that enables this attention is encouraged by the poems' formal austerity. Repetition, transformation, and attention are the cornerstones of his poetics; lines are born, buried, and resurrected with minute but crucial variations. In "A Number of Times," for example, the nine-line stanza that opens the poem creates near-mirror images. Their plane of reflection—an uncanny crossing of heaven and earth—is

the anomalous fifth line:

> The son steps into what he heard was empty
> the son steps into the empty house of his father
> the son steps into what he had heard was empty
> the son steps into and is seized and bitten
> the son steps into and is bitten a number of times
> the son steps into only to be seized and bitten
> the son steps into what he's heard was empty
> the son steps into the house of his father
> the son steps into what he heard was to be empty.

To the extent that it relies on transformations like these, *Crosses* represents a continuation and culmination of the compositional technique at work in his previous book *Loop*. But these poems stand apart from those in *Loop* and from older pieces like "Slow Song for Mark Rothko." The lines of that poem mimic the painter's luminous blocks of color, with their auratic, tapering edges:

> To breathe and stretch one's arms again
> to breathe through the mouth to breathe to
> breathe through the mouth to utter in

The imagery of expanse (outstretched arms, free-flowing respiration) is enhanced by the lightness of the lines, with the ethereal infinitives at their periphery.

In a poem like "Crosses," however, Taggart replaces that lightness with a measured pummelling. The lines do not breathe, they heave:

> Before there can be a kind of a cross there has to be a ground
> before there can be any kind of the one there has to be the other
> before the one the other and the other is a ground
> there can be a black cross if there can be a black ground
> there can be a black ground if a black field can be imagined

In *Crosses* the pummelings are often so heavy, the saturation with blood so pervasive, that density almost overcomes luminosity. Taggart is aware of the danger; in *Songs of Degrees* he writes, "I thought density was the true goal. If the motion of the cadence made for a sufficient density, then the space would have to be saturated. […]But this is not desirable because it immobilizes. Complete saturation leaves no room to move." To avoid complete saturation, Taggart drew inspiration from the "dense and complexly luminous" colors of stained glass. The laminations of cathedral windows—"particularly the inner-glowing red"—are enriched by the "impurities, air bubbles, and streaks within

them." Likewise, the spiritual world emerges through the imperfections and vicissitudes of the material. Color resides in stains, interest in impurity.

The line from Kafka that opens the book is revisited at its close and transformed. Here Kafka's words stain, and are also elided by, the pure negative space of the page, which literalizes, even materializes, the spiritual world. The slow, deliberate rhythms deliver us to the brink of that world just as that rhythm begins to abate:

> Kafka: fact
>
> nothing
>
> nothing but a spirit world
> nothing but
>
> deprives
>
> gives
> certainty.

*Crosses* is a book of Good Fridays, of crosses fashioned from struck trees that still absorb—and exude—the blood of bodies nailed to them. The light filtering through its pages is the light of the final hours of the Passion. The sun is awash in sacrificial blood—the blood of "an ongoing sacrifice," an endless crucifixion on the cross of time and eternity. And if these poems are approached with the attention they call for, one might participate in the spiritual world they evoke, looking upon oneself as through a glass, stained.

Jeremy Biles

§

Simon Jarvis, *The Unconditional.* London: Barque Press, 2005. 242pp. $35

It would defeat rhetoric to overstate the peculiarity of Simon Jarvis's book, *The Unconditional: A Lyric*; this must be among the most peculiar books ever published, up there with Raymond Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, to which its multiple parentheses and interminable prosody seem to pay tribute. Imagine if you can an enterprise as formally intricate as Roussel's, a continuous poem of 237 pages mainly in iambic pentameter,

in which whole pages pass without a full stop, but dedicated to a high level discourse on prosody, critical theory, and phenomenology; all this conducted in a philosophical language drawing on Adorno's negative dialectics and on critiques of Husserl and Heidegger, hybridized with a macaronic descriptive and narrative language which is the unnatural offspring of Wyndham Lewis and P.B. Shelley.

The poem is peopled, or one might say *characterised*, by a cast of discussants like refugees from an Iain Sinclair novel finally fed up with walking: these characters are =x ("For purposes of performance," the endnote advises, "the character could be rendered by so much of a gulp as can be achieved without swallowing"), Agramant, Qnuxmuxkyl, and Jobless. The action promises to involve a road trip, perhaps starting in Cambridge and heading for London, but it reaches no farther territorially than a pub in Stevenage, which is like setting out from Chicago to survey America and being detained for months in a bar in South Bend with ears chewed incessantly by its opinionated and improbably erudite denizens.

To describe this poem's prosody in terms of its metrics would be inadequate, for what it engenders in the reader's breast is far from the regularity and reassurance of Alexander Pope's numbers or from the stabbing and poking of a satirist like Charles Churchill. When it comes to low-life novels it may be commonplace to talk of a literary experience as a roller-coaster ride, but *The Unconditional* fully justifies the figure. Pages of impossibly headlong rhythm will be startlingly blocked, for example, by three or more lines ending with the same monosyllabic word, and after turning on this dime, will again charge off harum-scarum through a 300-word rhyme-propelled sentence. The poem transits between rhyming couplets and blank verse, with these transitions often near-imperceptible; caesuras are extremely rare and rhymes almost always monosyllabic, hence at once thumpingly marking the lines' enjambment and rushing across such traffic calming measures. Here are iambics with the insistence of rap.

After this description the reader may wonder if he or she is being invited to take such a caper seriously. But although the poem may be eccentric to a marked extent, it belongs to a serious enterprise; its matter is consistent with Simon Jarvis's published philosophical and literary critical work, and in a profound sense the poem acts as that work's exemplar. Jarvis's overarching thesis is specified by both the poem's title and the title of his essay in *Critical Quarterly,* "Prosody as Cognition." What Jarvis floats and what his poetical carry-on would demonstrate is that poetry is not only a linguistic practice, but that poetry (of a kind or kinds requiring to be identified) may arrive at a special kind of cognition wherein knowledge and information cannot be distinguished from formal attributes—and the tissue of references to a variety of music in *The Unconditional*, suggests one way in which this claim might

be understood. Jarvis's position evidently is related to Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, which gives precedence to a theory of art over a theory of truth, and might be supported by readings of Shelley (the poems and "The Defence of Poetry") or Celan (the poems and "Meridian")—or indeed of Wordsworth, the subject of a forthcoming book by Jarvis.

"The unconditional" is a term surely intended to evoke the great concluding passage of Theodore Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, where a negative utopianism, that is a redemptive utopianism, which is understood to be impossible, even absurd as conceived in Celan's "Meridian" address, is articulated as the necessary horizon for art, philosophy, and political struggle. Indeed it becomes a condition for thought:

> The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.

The polemical tendency of Jarvis's book *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* is precisely to reassert this imperative for negative utopianism in the face of postmodern dismissals of grand narrative and eschatology. Jarvis's fear is that the extinction of a utopian horizon for the left leads necessarily to the installation of capitalism as an historical terminus, as a new nature succeeding that obsolete natural world now thoroughly subordinated and exploited.

How then do prosody as cognition and negative utopianism meet in *The Unconditional*?

> Lovers of harmony though heard it shine
>     in K. 491 in ’48
> the obsolescence of whose vinyl corps
>     adds exercising inexplicitness
> with every surface flaw upon the scale
>     unloosing chromaticism from its lock
> to waver gently out into the air
>     of a new planet treading shakily
> or as a lamb will wobble on the grass
>     so this cadenza lacked all certainty
> other than that belief which bears us up
>     from one step to the next before we think
> how to fall over into earth or drink))))))

It is characteristic of Jarvis's dialectical habits that the utopian horizon of Mozart's music becomes persuasive only when heard through the surface flaws of a vinyl record, the danger of derailment attending every ethereal melody. "Lovers of harmony" must be set on edge so as not to float into a complacent sphere beyond all struggle, equipped with SACD, DVD-A, and the consumer clutter purporting to unveil some absolute original, a "performance" like the creation of the world. Similarly poetry should be constituted corporeally rather than divided from the loam of language as a pure showing-forth; poetry should not be understood as a discursive intervention, subordinate to theoretical or critical prescription, nor as a set of objects for adjustment in the workshop, followed by contemplation and categorization. The poetry which concerns Jarvis, and which he aspires to make, plays out of the body as instrument and substrate—so reputedly Jarvis declines to read from his poem but will recite it from memory. Thus while prosody may refer to form, form itself must be understood in its emergence, by acknowledging that the embodied memory which utters it has itself been shaped collectively. Prosody mediates between language, the flesh, and the collective. Divorcing the semantic content of the poem from its prosodic disposition re-enacts the Cartesian cleavage of mind and body.

Jarvis's choice of a traditional English poetic meter has nothing anachronistic about it; it permits him to assert a collective history and experience as a ground-bass to his exceedingly wayward meditations and poetic flights. Furthermore he plays very fast and loose prosodically, some passages slamming in a four-beat and others doubling up to ten:

> As in the end of deference referring its slaves with less of a little incision
>     As an unending vale of suffering shedding allegory with a little
>         inattention
> As in an undated marvel of a laved trove bleeding mythful goth with a lot of
>     flotation

Nevertheless the pentameter asserts itself throughout, a continually breaking wave, both predictable and ever-mutative. The poem's prosody works both with and against the pentameter's pulse, alarmingly jittering into cardiac overdrive, grinding down to treadmill trudge.

What are the conditions under which formalistic verse might encode a cognitive adventure, rather than an exercise in a different, reactionary kind of ideological complicity? Some quite different instances come to mind; the poems of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, written at the structuralist moment but remaining under the spell of late Victorian artifice and enamoured of William Empson's example; the sports of John Ashbery; and perhaps the nearest relative to *The Unconditional*, Edward Dorn's oddly disregarded poem *The Cycle*, an interlude in rhymed quatrains to Dorn's free verse epic *Slinger* and like Jarvis's poem filled with Shelleyan echoes:

> I see cars drawn by rainbow-wingèd steeds
> Which trample the dim winds: in each there stands
> A wild-eyed charioteer urging their flight
> On a long take-off roll, this is the purging of the beads.

*Slinger* in its entirety and especially *The Cycle* and *The Winterbook* (Book III), is one of the most convincing large-scale enterprises of prosody as cognition in English besides Shelley's; for Jarvis surely jests when he points to the poetic truth of John Dyer's *The Fleece*, an instructional epic on sheep-rearing from 1757. The characters of *The Cycle*, The Janitor, Rupert, the Atlantes, ViceVersa and *um*, might readily take a break in Stevenage with the Jarvis gang, even if their discourse is more pre-Socratic than negative-dialectical.

At several points in his poem Jarvis confronts individualist or ultra-materialist heresies; he swipes at biologism, Rawlsian contract ethics, and fashionable dismissals of metaphysics. Jarvis seems to espouse a phenomenology reminiscent of Levinas in the importance of the face-to-face encounter and an ethics of redemption. Rather than seeking a phenomenological fullness-in-recognition, however, he courts "the not-made, truth" through following (or accompanying critically) the unfolding of works of art. Fullness-in-recognition would depend too abjectly on an expressivity in accord with the ideal of the perfect rendition, one sought in the recording studio or in an actor's declamation of verse. In this sense it would correspond to what Roland Barthes terms an "expressive reduction" in his essay "The Grain of the Voice," whereas "the not-made, truth" entails a following of the grain, with the conceptually-emergent and the corporeal united in an exploratory prosody.

But aesthetic objects to be followed surely must constitute a special class, exceeding the solicitations of impact, presence, and sublimity held to

diagnose an object as an artwork. For instance the conception of Shelley's poetry as ethereal and vague neglects its materialism, both political and scientific; the work is animated by contradictions which it never overcomes but which prosodically are held in a meteorological cycle of formation, ethereality, dissolution, material fertilisation, sterility or destruction, and re-suspiration. Hence its flights and faints, rendered by Jarvis as follows:

> Determinedly comprehend each most extended tongue of spirit in my
> Dim yet still clarifying cloud map as of listening or dumb not deaf or glistening
> Determinedly erase when what evasing vague areas of spiritlessness can or will claim
> Disesperatively revive with vir or can cano of minute compassion this bashed up
> Diminishment of own soul sunken in the abashed lossface and its nerveless cheek
> Dyspraxially to disprefix a a praxis or are that is one good
> Disincarnation not sliding aloft but singing open at open Love

For Jarvis, politics demands a prosody competent to animate the lamb—a lamb of God, a Blakean lamb—since without such a redemptive moment, politics subsides into administrative reason. On the other hand, one cannot entirely disconnect politics from the fantasy of a realised eschatology. While there are moments in *The Unconditional* which seem to accept Christianity as a redemptive structure, there is also a caveat that Christianity's authority must be kept in abeyance. As Joseph Joubert wrote in 1797 in an uncanny anticipation of negative utopianism, "The staircase that leads us to God. What does it matter if it is make-believe, if we really climb it? What difference does it make who builds it, or if it is made of marble or wood, of brick, stone, or mud? The essential thing is that it be solid and that in climbing it we feel the peace that is inaccessible to those who do not climb it." Such bracketing of eschatology is critical to the negative dialectics of Jarvis's utopianism.

It has become a required gesture in discussions of Anglo-American modernism to condemn all aesthetically-founded politics. But in order to accept the invitation of *The Unconditional,* one must interrogate this broad condemnation. For even the (politically) perilous aesthetic of Imagism could take a dialectical turn in the poetry of Zukofsky and Oppen, and later open into the non-human universe with Olson. Each of these modernist inheritors espoused a different version of poetry as cognition which led to work exceeding any *position*. Olson's argument with Descartes and his insistence on a collective history-making and proprioception, not to belabor the implications of breath as measure, anticipate Jarvis's remarkable adventure. It is a sign of the importance of Jarvis's work as a whole that it reconfigures the past so that Shelley and Olson can be aligned in an unanticipated way.

This short review represents a first attempt at positioning *The Uncondi-*

*tional*, an ironical traducing which a reviewer can hardly avoid. A reviewer selects a theme and, now subservient to the production of evidence, betrays the poem. So this will end with another passage designed to support points established, like crampons in an avalanche.

> yet holding secret all its inner sense
>         a fine one particle within him sings
> doing what A's fat textbook says you can't
>         willing a meaning to the edge of birth
> renewing thought in beating down all dearth
>         as when apparently from scraps of noise
> apparently not placed but simply thrown
>         or simply falling through the atmosphere
> a non contingent pressure or a sense
>         patterns a ripple or a pulse of skin
> or reaches with a tongue tip to announce
>         both what it wants to taste and what it speaks
> or trips along a lawful palate so
>         as magic floating down to earth or so
> ascending to no other place than this
>         circumference of objects thinking bliss
> or central bosom of all mutual aid
>         infinitesimally melody
> willed and invented or retrieved and made

John Wilkinson