

Cambridge Reading Series



Stephen Rodefer & Francesca Lisette

Friday, 12 February 2010
Judith E. Wilson Drama Studio
Faculty of English
University of Cambridge

FRANCESCA LISETTE

SONNET

Star-pressed heat locked in where breathing
is utterly / useless: hurled steel
cut against coral bleach
judged a lash out at perfume, shy in cups.
By & by yawning ochre
comes a germination or sod; houses
threaten to invert their dimensions,
slip by flesh-coloured.

You here, tracer, I can feel the precise
count of paces : yellow smoke
vanishes over fist into fucked air -
ripe for placement, a screaming butterfly
zones in on my brow's soft seal
dripping at the red's recant:
prised off my eyelash, set to snarl.

From A HISTORY OF AUTONOMY & ANGER

Seizing up the weakened cradle your bent-black chest is present to,
louder in the gritted wind. Notes of lice tinkle down in sun, hard with
malformed lushness, muffled in swathes or a swept lip. You press me
volatile to your pure solicitations, which complicates my being ONLY
A TOY. Not for labels are their teeth arrowing out like angels sicked on
ash vulvar. We make a face, or two, playing for feed at whites which
hiccup 'self/object': sheathed in PLAYDO. Slip away knowledge
as dust booms the bar; nook hanging as a blond void, to be filled, or
something like it. Renders impulse slide nectarine: breaks open the
police-helmet, sniggering at small stitch. Speechless with depth, we
relinquish flounce & pass on so naked, burnt as a side remainder of what
catches in the real light of day.

8/12/09

THREE STRIKES

Loath to crisp the kiss / force to a dulcet circle

I, speaker brim at hoof of your wanted daylight

pressing sigma ~ shelved like pumice

my corpuscles' need, their blended ice, might as well radio such arc

to an arrested disco ointment bred by a lie. If to feel

you is to bond whiskey in Siamese prayer, plagiarize dots & be dictated to,

I'll carve out a safety zone – less & less likely –

playback blurt gives me jitters, twist rabbit

ash ready to puke love back out the receiver.

- & if I could just hold you now, as dust filters on

eyedril; paper sex ballerina moved to *sighs*

torquing the gratitude we slip up on – no, knives aren't

necessary // bruised sky hurts to drink its fill.

And the astro-temporal redux folds up to this:

grifter pads torture the streaming cupboard, prise applied

rain stare off the wrong palm it was clenched to, did you

apply your best self

to me in that might

know what you were

doing or

fell into honour despite the sleeper cadence of your loved left eye?

If I were to slay this lapis calf would you stalk its cumulus fee, would

you gather its crown of weeds?

ON FRANCESCA LISETTE

It is as difficult to anticipate where this poetry is going as it is to gauge where it presently is and where it might have come from. There may not yet be enough of Francesca Lisette's work in printed circulation to sketch reliable generalities concerning its typical let alone important features. Nonetheless, what is available demonstrates - though not by consistent means or to consistent ends - a broadside of negotiating terms of emphasis that might include: modulation between forensic scrutiny within object-worlds of implicitly private witness and pitched urgencies of direct personal address, management of sympathetic resonances across successive imagistic/propositional frames, peristalsis and chicanery of swiftly implied and rescinded contexts, synaesthetic effects enjoined in the fissures of cognitive texture, microcosms of perceptual ambivalence opened up by delicately traumatised syntax.

Yet these are not terms exhausted in (exophonic or endophonic) performance, however persuasively affective-expressive patterning might seem to nominate itself as gestural architect of relative propositional values on such occasions. The modernist injunction to radical morphological economy in the interests of clarity is at once upheld and turned in upon itself in the local production of luminous distortions ("rain stare off the wrong palm it was clenched to") that reverberate across and inflect the whole discursive enterprise, so that detail is never conclusively subordinate to arrangement. Tensions between local and global uncertainty are too complex to tolerate any single reading as representative of their interaction.

This poetry's resistances to conventions of thematic comportment - to its credit - do not display a particular attitude or theoretical position vis-a-vis 'language' or 'the world' towards and from which its substratum of subject(ed)-matter is co-ordinated. It is gratifyingly difficult therefore to summarise the handling of these resources as a range of tactics on the author's part. This much ensures that the question of *what this poetry is about*, rather than becoming sidelined by any description of its skirmishes against received structures of aboutness, remains a centrally vital question to be determined *by* rather than *for* it.

— M.W.-H.

STEPHEN RODEFER

Time Loves a Hero

After the plant is down,
The sunshine, the conferences, the hard
To swallow meals, the birds, the pain,
And light's clear distillation of orchids
And tiniest lantana,
After the marriage of lovers,
The signatures, the will power, the money,
The memory of sleep after long travel,
Time loves a hero who's bent on the trail,
Home from the arctic but off
To the games, driven toward unknown arenas
And avoiding the very *idea* of bed.

Eric Dolphy's smile blesses the night,
Soothing the memory of the murder of Wardell Gray
In Vegas years ago, before the boycott began.
The big test looms before the entire quartet,
And no one on the jacket realizes what contracts
Will be out on even next week's destiny.

Time loves a hero, whom it meets at the shore,
And the eyes are bright with a serviceable candour.

From *Emergency Measures* (The Figures, 1987)

LOT'S WIFE'S RAZOR

Whereof one cannot
speak, thereof one
must remain thought
full, till the absurd
silence lapse its
self into a scream,
trying hopelessly to be
little but a salty cry, limp
cords round the neck,
shaving the future at five.
Which says something:
the thought dreams cream.

But what? Speak again.
Even of the unspeakable.

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ON STEPHEN RODEFER

‘Satiric ploy with bedrock concerns.’ Robert Creeley’s phrase gives us Rodefer’s poetry in a nutshell, which is a sufficiently tight space to suggest a lot without giving anything away. Creeley’s ‘ploy’ here is modelled on Rodefer’s own poetic practice. The synoptic blurb’s armour is its density, not to be cracked open for a kernel of insight. This seems like a defensive gesture but in fact it’s unstoppably dialogic. The bedrock concerns of Rodefer’s poetry shift to become the superficial presentment of the ploy: deep seriousness sends up its own guarantor (to the surface). In terms of these particular Rodeferian textual dynamics, their most devastating statement is unquestionably *Four Lectures*. But quoting from that inimitable book makes little sense if you haven’t read it, and perhaps still less if you have. The field-effect of the whole book, with its poles of ploy and bedrock, snaps into place within any excerpted line, but only because the superstructure of their source presents the same inextricable double bind.

Where O’Hara spoke of the poem as ‘between two persons instead of two pages,’ in Rodefer not just the poem but the single line can be in two minds or more. The straight-faced statement always contemplates its own reversal. From *Four Lectures* on, tough new antitrust legislation ensures neither poet nor reader gets close to a monopoly on tone in Rodefer’s work. Even returning to earlier Rodefer, where the O’Haran influence is less fully alchemized, the rules of engagement seem retroactively to have changed, the ironic potential of the lyric voice atomised.

Rodefer has said that ‘[d]ifference is more useful than ambition or applause, and is actually a way of stating the basic concerns of all writing.’ This determination hints at the visible depths of his work and continues to shape his formidable practice as a poet and critic.

FRANCESCA LISETTE is a poet currently living in Brighton, where she studies Critical Theory and coordinates the Chlorine reading series. She has published ‘Tarorchid’ with Grasp Press and her work has appeared in *Crater*, *Axolotl*, *Klatch* and *Holly White*. A collection with Grasp Press is forthcoming. As part of her CRS reading, Lisette read the poetry of Mina Loy.

Carcenet has just published *Call It Thought*, the selected poems of American writer **STEPHEN RODEFER**. Rodefer is also the author of *One or Two Love Poems from the White World*, *VILLON* by Jean Calais, *The Bell Clerk’s Tears Keep Flowing*, *Four Lectures* (which was a winner of the American Poetry Center’s Annual Book Award), *Oriflamme Day* (with Ben Friedlander), *Emergency Measures*, *Passing Duration*, *Leaving*, *Erasures*, *Left Under A Cloud*, and *Mon Canard*, among other titles. *Chicago Review* published a special issue on his work in 2008. In addition to Villon, Rodefer has published translations of Sappho, selections from the Greek Anthology, Catullus, Lucretius, Dante, Baudelaire, Rilke, Frank O’Hara and the Cuban poet Noel Nicola. He is currently translating Baudelaire for a collection to be published next year, entitled *Fever Flowers: Les fleurs du val*. As part of his CRS reading, Rodefer read the poetry of Ben Jonson, Emily Dickinson, and Hart Crane.

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