

For More Lectures

a poem by

Stephen Rodefer

With a portrait and interview of the author by Greg Fuchs

zerodegree writing program || lack mountain #2

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*For More Lectures is **lack mountain #2***

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The Soul and the Self: Stephen Rodefer in Orbit

Stephen Rodefer was the realest poet next to Alice Notley I had ever met and heard perform. Dig his scarf, bad boy gaze, bi-colored leather folio, and ambiguous wrist. During the years that I knew Stephen, he lived in and around San Francisco, New York, and Paris. He honed an infamous rep — either loved or loathed for private diatribes publicly delivered over cocktails, and a romantic masculinity which was received as toxic by some — but few denied the potency of Rodefer's poetry. He was all bravado, fear, anger, and love spilling over, dissolving the boundaries that separate social intercourse from the lover's discourse.

Rodefer came of age during the zenith of radical hippiedom while teaching at the University of New Mexico. Before expanding his mind by dropping LSD with Steve Baer, Zomes founder, while watching the Apollo 11's moon landing, on television and in the sky, Rodefer arrived in Albuquerque with a solid bourgeois education. The grand-grand scion of the Rodefer Glass Company, Steve left boarding school to wander, finding his way to mentors like Charles Olson, and studying toward a Ph.D. at SUNY-Buffalo.

Sometimes Rodefer acted out because he wanted to be loved and respected in his field. Other times he overstepped social boundaries, negligible or grotesque depending on our limits of class and gender. One poet-son's rejection of his industrialist-father's worldview is another human's lack of grace. He often was just being a gadfly. At various times Rodefer had been a welcomed libertine among puritanical writers.

Among his books, two have been highly influential, *Villon* by Jean Calais (Duende, 1976), a hip and eternally relevant translation of the 15th-century poet, and *Four Lectures* (The Figures, 1981), an insightful display of the radical possibilities of language.

Rodefer once told me that everything in *Four Lectures* came from the radio which would be on while he wrote. Stephen's *Four Lectures* was one of the books that altered the direction of my life, steering me toward a deeper study of poetry and its uses. Stephen proposes in the book's preface: "My program is simple: to surrender to the city and survive its inundation. To read it and in reading, order it to read itself. Not a doctrine, but a public notice."

Thrusting an intimate, private language into the public sphere, in service to a public program, could put Stephen at risk as much as any behavior he ever brought to the party. The achievement of *Four Lectures* -- its blocky yet beguiling sentences, the innuendo, the erudition and the deadpan fun -- leaves you wondering, "what next?" Stephen was trying to answer that question himself. One answer was to say adieu, to leave a farewell note to a style before it became a manner.

Stephen beat himself to the punch, and everyone else, in writing "For More Lectures." It was as much for himself as for any future book publication. It seems like it was enough to close out the account, and move on in search of the next move. The holograph reproduced here is from a copy of "For More Lectures" Stephen gave to painter/poet John McNally in 1990.

The two met in Boulder in the summer of 1988. McNally was heading to San Francisco as Rodefer was leaving for the East Coast. The connection was an important one, artistically and practically -- Stephen helped with work opportunities and introductions, and the two began a long-distance conversation about poetry, work and family.

The poems continued to jump the fences and leap boundaries — academic, avant-garde, experimental, language, lyric, modern, and romantic — and sometimes stopped being poems on a page entirely. The logomachia that started in verse expanded into essays on the “post-Classical” and dismantlings of the “canon” and the idea of canonicity. At the same time his gnomic utterances jumped out of the boundaries of the book into a series of “language paintings”.. In 2003, he had a show of these paintings at the Bowery Poetry Club. They were aggressively sloganeering, with an outsider’s touch, yet were unmistakably Stephen Rodefer works, publicly intimate, defiantly yearning. At the opening, Stephen delivered a mockery of an academic lecture. “The whole thing is a serious joke about the over-intellectualization of the thought process,” he asserted.

It’s that ability to take the piss out on the literature that he loved, and that he worked in his whole life long, that sets Stephen Rodefer apart from many of his contemporaries on the poetry scene, then and today. In “For More Lectures”, he’s even able to take aim at himself, the hyper-didact of *Four Lectures*, when he felt the hazards of acclaim closing in.

— *Greg Fuchs*

Memorize this,
then destroy
it by eating it...

For More Lectures ✓

John ^{Oct 190}
^{of drinks with in top}
This is a complete
draft with windows open
as they say - reader copy
Enjoying Helthstock
especially its ablation
absolutes - S 420-1350

Dilatory hair, sweetest flesh, dilapidated rose, another recherche mystagogue
intent on silks and socks. Money talks, love walks, children long to go out
and play. It is necessary to remain able, to distinguish the difference between
prolific and verbose. Verbs serve humans. Step into her bed and demand an index
of last lines, or you won't sign. Sweet tulips odorless, wild civility,
snow white hairs on me. As a child Picabia replaced the old masters in his house
with copies of his own, and sold the "originals" to finance his stamp collection.
Unadorned by a hardon, spindrift is all. Nice nieces, Writhing writing. Sick glory.
Rabid transit. We arrive in several canoes and have nothing but scorn for those
who do not allow things to be as complicated as they are. She looked gorgeous
in the latest synechdoche, but I was Helen's man. The suicides will be he's and she's
who cannot love life doubtless^{full}ly. Beards and sleeves, cows and poppies, my mind
is one with Caesar V, not to stray a meter from my poem. But I was kind of humping
that you would lie in ^{these} my sheets. If I had not been born, another could be drinking this cup.
On the hem of the lawn the babies are weaving their clearest saliva on looms of ivy and scum.

[Margin note by John McNally]

Memorize this,
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For More Lectures

[post-it note from SR to John McNally]

Oct/go

John This is a complete draft mit windows
open as they say -- readers copy
Enjoying Aetherstock especially its
ablative absolutes -- S 420-1350
What're you gonna be on Halloween?

Dilatory hair, sweetest flesh, dilapidated rose, another recherche mystagogue
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Rabid transit. We arrive in several canoes and have nothing but scorn for those
who do not allow things to be as complicated as they are. She looked gorgeous
in the latest synecdoche, but I was Helen's man. The suicides will be he's and she's
who cannot love life doubtfully. Beards and sleeves, cows and poppies, my mind
is one with Caesar V, not to stray a meter from my poem. But I was kind of humping
that you would lie in these sheets. If I had not been born, another could be drinking this cup.
On the hem of the lawn the babies are weaving their clearest saliva on looms of ivy and scum.

In the Alameda a woman walks over to a rose bush and picks a thorn. On her stone bench, sitting on an arm, she proceeds to clean her teeth. Dilapidated pose. The Picts depicted themselves blue. Smart move. I will break your waves if you will watch my night. The night Kid Ory kicked the bucket, they wailed. I need a protege. Adorable whore, can you butle? I want my responsibility. I miss cacoons and ginger men, and when I handle them elsewhere, ^{it's} ~~it's~~ not the same. It's a different kettle now of screams, drinking powder, slipping pants, mouthing off. But I see similarities I throw myself into an image. Art links letters. The pile-up figures, Conception is not as wide as the world, nor deep as well, but ^{it} will suffices. You fill it out. Mens agitation. Used up preludes. Anemic double bills. Cat shit and dog puke. God knows we love, but who? Before the stand-in is finished with one thing, you're asking for another. ^{By} your wax. His weltanschauung was beatup, but his syntax was in ⁱⁿ tacking. Who is interested in the eventuality that little J A would come to dominate the century the way big Ten did last. Now that the new ^{PG} ~~GP~~ was (a) ^{BC} ~~CB~~. The general ^{were} ~~is~~ fond of eating women. But that which exists throughitself calls M E.

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Farewell to Innsbruck I say. I say leave me loathesome night and I
might lay down awhile beside the babbling brook. Death is the absence
of cloud on glass. Breath is the original dope. Then it all starts to complicate
with the introduction of the breast. It was something. Mother's milk was addictive.
The things she had. It killed the pain. I felt home. It was the land of the bull.
I wish I hadn't travelled that canal. I didn't want to leave there. Now look where I am,
worn, marred, unmarried and still warm. And warned continually of the peril of still
drinking born spirits that make the number days to count their milky calender.
Develop some indifference to pain. Better self love than neglect. And we should fear
the native might in art's bosom, while not forgetting dear Falstaff died for Agincourt.
Me, I'm from Overlook Court, Bellaire Ohio. You can still write me there while I
court the A before the B before the C before the D. And A is an arduous angel
in the Shakespearean dawn, through which I walk enveloped in this cloak to ruminate
the coming siege and try the spirits of my jannisaries. Camped with nervous dread we become
allias though jealous of contesseration, then make a little touch to harry in the night.

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Unmatchable mastiffs the color of nutmeg inkly thought as hot as ginger berries.
Happier men than she hold their manhood cheap. Sadder women than he value honest sex.
Vivienne Walker takes a fellow where he lives, Earnest Hare for instance.
Cramps. Generation. A county with a migraine problem, unemployed, editing the sciatica.
Put some water on. Listen to the noise. Who could know what was in the crates
Brahms just chucked in the Rhine? Well, you could always guess like a scholar,
preparing for his autopsy. Publish and Perish, in the magazine Reputations.
Or better exercise. Cut some kindling, make some kin and put the author thing down
to authorship. The authorities are at the door, we've got the context turned up too loud.
Our readers are ^{the plaintiffs} complaining. Accomodation for a night. A person united will never be divided,
until they meet their autopsy. Self consciousness is always one of parts as well.
The jaw bone is the first to leave the skeleton. Libido leaves the veldt.
A word is the last thing any woman can say to a particular ^{other} man. Rife gate
to the ruin run by the sun. Slow chapters. Sweet ball. My hat in your pocket. ^{the felt}
Blind surrealist love is windowdust/ but do not change too fast the registration of ~~this pelt~~.

GR 10/22/90

Now of the pelt.

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Blind surrealist love is windowdust/ but do not change too fast the registration of the pelt nor of the pelting.

SR

10/22/90



Q&A with Stephen Rodefer at the Bowery Poetry Club

[Originally published in Boog City #16, May 2004]

How did you get to New Mexico?

After Buffalo I was offered two jobs, University of Kansas and University of New Mexico. Lawrence was interesting, a hilly town with an abolitionist background, tempting. Then I go to Albuquerque. After two days I immediately prefer Lawrence, but Larry Goodell convinces me stay another day, promising to show me the real New Mexico. So he takes me to the Native-American dances at various pueblos.

I realize in one day that I would rather be in New Mexico in 1968 than Kansas. You see those dances, come on, where would you rather be?

New Mexico was a very interesting place to be in the late 1960s because hippie America was based in San Francisco theoretically and iconographically but New Mexico was much more wild. The first communes were there, Ken Kesey before he settled in La Honda, Buckminster Fuller, Steve Baer and the Zomes. It was all happening. It was all going.

In 1968, simultaneously with Kissinger's and Nixon's secret bombings of Cambodia, I give Charles Bukowski his first reading. He was in New Orleans with Lou, the woman with the press, and I offer Bukowski a reading on the basis of some "Notes of a Dirty Old Man" I read in the *New Orleans Rag* of 1967. He tells me that he has never before been invited to read at a University.

So Bukowski comes out. The University tries to get an injunction against the reading. We go to court the afternoon of the reading. The judge dismisses it out of freedom of speech.

Later, Lynn Orkendall comes along, she has written a dirty poem about fucking the President of the United States in the *New Mexico Quarterly*, which I'm editing with Gene Frumkin, a special edition on avant-garde poetry. The University decides to censor its own magazine because of dirty poems. We go to court to get it unlocked, we are unsuccessful.

The next fall I publish an edition titled the *New Mexico Quarter* with the censored poetry and some other stuff to make it good like James Joyce. On the cover we use the picture of John Lennon and Yoko Ono naked from the album *Two Virgins*. We superimpose Feral Head's, the president of the university, face on Lennon's uncircumcised body, standing next to Yoko Ono.

There was a state investigation of the University for having communists and pornographers. I was the pornographer and there was a guy in the Political Science Department who was the communist by virtue of teaching Marx. I was a pornographer by virtue of publishing a poem with the word cunt in it. The poem was by Michael McClure. We had Creeley's cunt poem too.

What is the importance of lineage?

Supreme, it is all important. Do not forget that lineage is not only heritage but it is line. Line is nothing more than generation, not just father to son but one line making another.

How can you ask is line important to someone who writes lines? No poet could say with any rationale that lineage is not important to them because line is the meaning of lineage. I do not mean that I believe in Tinkers to Evers to Chance. Yet, you cannot escape tradition, even if you try to upset it there is no way you are going to escape it.

Is the poet's person connected to the poet's work?

Only metonymically and physically by touch, I suppose, if you think of the pen or the keyboard.

The person is at the public presentation of the work therefore they are intimately connected. It actually comes down to metaphysics, spirituality, and habeas corpus. Personality, work, and person is all the same.

Does the poet have a social responsibility?

To maintain the poetic function and to live as long as possible. Those are the only two responsibilities of the poet.

Really?

To the family. The immediate family. To the neighborhood, which can be a broad term.

Responsibility is maintaining the ability to respond. Which is a great definition because it absolves you of responsibility. Maintaining the ability to not respond but being beholden to previous imprecations is what we think of as responsibility. That is, what you are supposed to do, however responsibility is really what you do do.

Talk about identity politics.

I am a critic of most academic colloquialism. Identity politics seems less articulate than identity formation, which is another trope of the same idea. I am distrustful of politics. Formation is a literary term, politics is not. Poems have form, poems do not have politics.

Although they do have politics insofar as it identifies the formation of the who is speaking: petit bourgeois, forced radical, assumed retrograde or progressive, or in-between. You can not not write autobiographical material even if you try because it is all autobiographical. You can not not write political poetry because it is political no matter what.

Has anyone ever called you a sexist?

Many times. It started with my first known book, *Villon*. In the book is the translation, "death is what woman defines." When I used to read that in the 1970s and '80s there would be hisses in the audience.

Well, yea, okay, but in fact death is what woman defines because birth is what woman defines. Death is the mother of beauty, it is all organic.

In fact, Villon is just writing a bitter sarcastic disappointed love poem. It could be a woman, gay, or lesbian writing it. It does not matter. Death is what this woman defines, death is what this man defines. Whether it is lesbian, homosexual, transgressive. To hiss "death is what woman defines" is to not be a good reader. Simple as that.

My relationship to feminism is critical and sympathetic. Critical insofar as listen to what you are listening to that you call sexist. "Death is what woman defines" is just a bitter remark by a hetero in the middle ages whose woman is fucking around. It is not gendered it only seems to be gendered by sociological happenstance.

If someone thinks I am a sexist pig, well that is sociology too. The literary world operates more along social vectors than on aesthetic, insofar as who is popular, who is in, who is out. So I am a sexist adventurer or aging puer complexed daffy duck flaneur dandy.

What if someone did not attend your performance because of this reputation?

I too would not go to hear someone's performance because I had the idea that it was not worth my while. That is prejudicial insofar as I have not really looked at it.

We make mistakes all the time. You have got to do that. You have got to have blinders on because you can not take in everything. Some of your blinders are going to make mistakes, some are going to be correct, and some are going to be protective. Even if they are protective of your mistaken idea of the prejudicial situation that you think is true.

I have overstepped boundaries everywhere. I have been annoying, I will be annoying again. It depends on the receptor's idea of spirit, not annoyance so much as annoyingness. I think if you are aggressive and potentially if not virtually obnoxious it is not good for receptivity but it does challenge the auditory sociology, sounds pretentious, of phenomenology. What is not the nature of prejudice but what is the instigation of prejudice? The instigation of prejudice is also sometimes full with cultural prejudice that no one inspects.

Do you believe in Utopias?

Yes, in a way. It is a more attractive question in the plural than the singular. I believe in utopia as an idea within a cultural literary history. I believe in utopia as virtual reality. Because you can have a utopia, one of many in any given instance in time. It can be love, art, dope, agitation, crime, a rush of exuberance, and exhilaration. You can have an utopia that can be supreme, that could last an hour, one day, or a week.

It is much more difficult to believe in the singular utopia because that is pre-Edenic. Once you fuck the other, eat the apple, and sleep with the snake there is no utopia.

I read *Utopia* as an undergraduate. It's great, the golden age. Communism is a degraded ideological version of utopia. It was admirable in its theoretical basis, means of production, distribution of wealth, etcetera, but in 1917 or '18 it was a lost cause.

Where do we stand after the fall of communism?

It has actually turned out, pragmatically, to be disastrous because communism provided détente so that America could not do whatever it wants.

