

**RHYMES WITH HISTORY:**  
**JOE FRANCIS DOERR AND KEVIN DUCEY**

Joe Francis Doerr, *Order of the Ordinary*. Cambridge, England: Salt, 2003.  
Kevin Ducey, *Rhinoceros*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon, 2004.

*Robert Archambeau*

What are the poets reading? If you were to ask Jeffrey Roessner, the editor of *The Possibility of Language*, he might say something like what he said in the introduction to that 2001 anthology of younger poets associated with Notre Dame. There, Roessner noted the wide range of influences on the poets, finding the range exciting and just a little bit troubling. It seemed that everyone was reading something different, and this, Roessner thought, indicated an unusual situation in literary history:

Contemporary poets have not inherited a single, well-defined lineage. Yes, the classics are still with us. But more poetry is being written and read today than perhaps at any other time in history—and almost everyone is reading something different. In this way, contemporary poetry mirrors the profusion of signals in satellite television: hundreds of channels, each beamed at a small, distinct audience. If T.S. Eliot began this trend by constructing his own tradition, now every individual talent is consigned to work through his or her own version of poetic history, often in maddening, disheartening isolation.

The loss of a sense of a shared collective tradition is the price one pays for freedom in one's influences, and for all of the discovery that comes with our post-canonical age. But just what are the poets of our age doing with this freedom? Roessner saw, in his poets, a range of reading and influence extending from Old Welsh texts to H.G. Wells, from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Strunk and White. But a glance through almost any of the mainstream poetry journals crowded into the back corner of your local Barnes and Noble reveals that too few poets have made good use of their post-canonical freedoms. Many seem to have read nothing but the works of their teachers at the local MFA mill, teachers who themselves seem to have used their library cards a bit lightly. In their work one is confronted time and time again, with poems that fail to get past the claustrophobia-inducing confines of the poet's daily life. Once seen as a courageous act of breaking through to raw authenticity, this confessional mode has become the cloister where poets

hide from the wider world.

If, however, the poets in question were taught by any of the rapidly graying Language crowd, one is often left with a different kind of claustrophobia: the usable past too often shrinks to a tradition born no earlier than Gertrude Stein. I once saw Charles Bernstein parody this tendency in second-generation Language writers: he showed a slide of cavemen crudely daubing the walls of their cave by torchlight, and said “here is the state of poetry before I launched my magazine.” Before the seventies, he implied, all was but a dire darkness and stricken lay the land. Oddly, he didn’t get a laugh from the self-consciously hip crowd at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. (If you look past the moon-eyed author portraits on the cover of the *American Poetry Review*, you’re likely to find some sort of ghastly hybrid of the confessional and the late-Langpo, a kind of unholy spawn of Jorie Graham, combining the worst from both solipsistic traditions. But let us leave those broad newsprint pages on the shelf, turning our backs on their sensitively brooding cover models).

The poets in Roessner’s anthology, whatever their individual talents or shortcomings, all show a wide sense of the possibilities of poetry in terms of both form and subject. In a sense, this comes from a habit not unlike that of their confessional or Langpo peers: they have read their teachers with admiration. And one teacher they all share is John Matthias. Matthias, who retires from Notre Dame in 2005, is one of the most well-read and broadly learned poets of his generation (“John is an interesting man,” John Berryman once said of Matthias, “but he is *very* literary”). Matthias’ stylistic affinities range across the whole spectrum of contemporary idioms, and across the centuries (he is, to my knowledge, the only poet ever to have made a poetic project of translating Thomas Hardy into Middle English). He has a well-informed historical consciousness, and his work reveals both his deep knowledge of obscure corners of history and his uncanny sense for the links between apparently disparate people and incidents. (If you read his “Working Progress, Working Title,” you’ll see exactly what Hedy Lamar had to do with the invention of the remote control. Really.) Joe Francis Doerr, one of the poets from Roessner’s anthology, has now come out with his first book, as has Kevin Ducey, a student of Matthias who came to Notre Dame too late to make the cut for *The Possibility of Language*. Doerr and Ducey each in their own ways exhibit the wide literary and historical range of their teacher. If their work represents a trend away from autobiography and old-school Language Writing, and toward a larger sense of the possibilities of poetry, it will be a most welcome and refreshing development in American literature.

Doerr’s *Order of the Ordinary* draws from Matthias in its powerful historical imagination and in the way that it focuses that imagination around particular pieces of found historical text. In one of the book’s most remarkable poems, the twenty-page “Corrigenda,” Doerr also shows a deep affinity with one of Matthias’ great influences, the often-overlooked Anglo-Welsh modernist David Jones. The poem begins by quoting a Welsh source text, the elegiac lament for a dead son “Marwnat Owein,” a text now all-but-unreadable to anyone but the scholarly specialist (“Eneit owein ap uryen,/ gobwyllit y ren oe reit” read the first two lines). Over the course of the following pages we see the old Welsh poem slowly reworked into contemporary English. These reworkings are interspersed with comments on the translation, as well as John Cage-style acrostics that make further, somewhat elliptical comments on the act of translation. Eventually the “Marwnat Owein” emerges in modern English, but not as a literal translation. Instead, the fourth section is anachronistically entitled “War Music for Steel Guitar,” and takes place in contemporary Texas where Doerr grew up:

Uriah’s boy Owen is dead,  
                   may God have mercy on his soul.  
 We dressed him in his favorite green  
                   shirt and put him on the table there.  
 No one would spit in your eye  
                   for crying over him.

Owen remains a dead son, and remarkably like the Owen of the original lament, but the speaker and events are recognizably of our own time. Doerr has (in the manner of David Jones) shown the continuities of past and present, even as he shows us the irreducible differences of different eras by retaining the original text in all of its alien unreadability.

Doerr doesn’t avoid the contemporary world or the powerful experiences of the self, even though he avoids the conventions that Marjorie Perloff calls “the authenticity model—the ‘true voice of natural feeling’ or ‘natural speech’ paradigm.” Those confessional conventions, still predominant in the pages of the fat quarterlies pumped out by your local university’s creative writing program, place the contemporary self at the center of the poem. In contrast, Doerr puts the contemporary self at the margin of his poem, as the translator of the Welsh text. We see this figure in the same way that we catch glimpses of the medieval scribes who left their spoor of commentary in the margins of their annotated texts. The speaker of “Corrigenda” faces the problems Doerr faces as translator, and this speaker can be as closely identified with the poet himself as is the speaker of any emotionally-express-

sive confessional lyric. Even in sections composed only of the source-text Doerr projects himself into the text with the translation-themed acrostics. But this self does not come to dominate the poem, which remains a far cry from lyric solipsism and confessional navel-gazing.

Doerr plays elaborate and fascinating textual games, but he retains a strong sense of emotional energy. As the linguistic impenetrability of the Welsh “Marwnat Owein” gives way to a revelation of the elegiac core of that poem, we experience a slowly growing sense of the pain of a parent who has lost a son, and a sense of the long, tearful history of such losses over the centuries. The poem has all the linguistic sophistication and self-consciousness of the Buffalo school, but takes us well outside the emotional range of all but a handful of those poets.

Doerr finds a kind of subject-rhyme between past and present in the juxtaposition of the medieval Welsh “Marwnat Owein” and the contemporary Texan “War Music for Steel Guitar.” He finds similar rhymes in many of the other poems of *Order of the Ordinary*, most often through investigating a historical text (such as *Venus in Furs* in “Thumbnails for Portrait of Sacher-Masoch”) or a language-archive (such as Nordic runes in “F U T H A R K 2K,” which must have made his typesetter cry). If you feel a little grandiloquent, you might call this the Poetics of the Archive. It is a fruitful method for our post-canonical times, in which those poets who read all read idiosyncratically. By choosing particular texts as his fields of poetic investigation, Doerr allows us the intertextual pleasures outlined in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” without relying on Eliot’s received canon of great works. The texts needn’t be widely familiar or culturally shared (what is, these days?): the sustained, careful working-through of the specific text or archive will make it familiar in the process of the reading. This method, one suspects, is learned from Matthias, who uses both specific texts and specific geographies to give his work a range of significance beyond the self.

Like Doerr’s *Order of the Ordinary*, Kevin Ducey’s *Rhinoceros* ranges far and wide through a variety of historical and literary references in seeking out the rhymes between past and present. Unlike Doerr, though, Ducey throws a generous handful of pop-culture into the mix, and tears some of his subject matter from the headlines of the newspapers. Consider “Dien Bien Phu,” a poem that begins with flintlock-toting chieftains from hostile tribes, takes us to the French at war in Vietnam, and then leads us here:

The Vandals beyond the Rhine  
were largely runaway slaves dispossessed  
freemen, seniors  
unable to afford prescription drugs—

Rome had it coming.

The drawing of parallels between the here-and-now and the there-and-then is very much the sort of thing we’d find in Doerr’s work. But the topicality of the poem and the easy offhandedness with which Ducey connects current events (American senior citizens road-tripping up to Canada to outflank America’s unforgivably profit-driven medical system) and the historical (the slaves fleeing Rome) presents a real contrast with Doerr. There’s also a difference in tone. Doerr is most comfortable with the elegiac, the disturbing, and at times something like the sublime—a rare combination in our times, and admirable. Ducey’s touch is lighter, and he’s often quirky and a bit comic. “Those hooligans out there, pal,/don’t care much for your poetry —” he writes, “They zooming round in them/shaggy pony chariots (celts?) with/.50 caliber mounted on back. Go/tell it to the Geats.” Yet he’s no less an acolyte of the often-funny Matthias for this—a fact to which the poem’s epigraph, taken from an essay on Matthias by Brooke Bergan, attests.

Ducey’s poems delight in the miscegenation of mythologies, crossbreeding, for example, the Greek and the Native American in a quickie couplet that refers to “The shadow visit to hell where/coyote can’t restrain himself.” There is also a fair amount of pop culture twisted together with all the high culture. Batman rubs shoulders with Atalanta in “Hero Tales,” and the book’s final poem, “Wim Wenders vs. the Wolfman,” gives us both cinema and the movies. What’s interesting about this mixing of pop culture and museum culture isn’t simply that it happens—the gesture was already showing its age when Frank O’Hara made it in “The Day Lady Died.” It is the ease with which it happens that is of interest. There’s no sense of campiness or condescension to it: Ducey is part of a generation suckled in the creed of postmodernism, and he moves between pantheons and cultural registers in complete comfort, feeling no need for any knowingly pursed lips, arched eyebrows, or fingers crooked into imaginary quotation marks.

All of this play is fun to watch: at times it is breathtaking. If there is a vice to the work, though, I suppose it could be found in just the slightest hint of the unbearable lightness of correspondences. Everything here-and-now seems to connect with everything there-and-then, quite quickly and quite briefly. If Doerr gives us a weighty (but never ponderous) poetics of the archive, Ducey gives us the intertextual freestyle, a running-and-gunning poetics filled with historical targets of opportunity. (I’d be delighted, by the way, if he were to use that as jacket copy somewhere. No charge.)

As distinct as they are, Ducey and Doerr share a fundamental orientation toward the rhyming of the familiar with the unfamiliar. They take

us out of the cloister of the self and beyond the version of literary history Bernstein parodied with his picture of cavemen. They are well worth your time, and their books are an intriguing index of the possibilities of poetry in our new century.