Matthew Roberson reviews Fabrice Rozié, Esther Allen, and Guy Walter, eds.

**AS YOU WERE SAYING: AMERICAN WRITERS RESPOND TO THEIR FRENCH CONTEMPORARIES**
Dalkey Archive Press

“As You Were Saying is a successful adventure in illustrating the unpredictable pleasures of encounter, dialogue, and connection.”

Bruce Holsapple reviews Philip Whalen; Michael Rothenberg, ed.

**THE COLLECTED POEMS OF PHILIP WHALEN**
Wesleyan University Press

“This poet is a master in the use of self-regard.”

Sam Truitt reviews Hannah Weiner; Patrick F. Durgin, ed.

**HANNAH WEINER’S OPEN HOUSE**
Kenning Editions

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LineOnLine announces reviews featured exclusively on ABR’s website.
As You Were Saying: American Writers Respond to Their French Contemporaries
Edited by Fabrice Rozié, Esther Allen, and Guy Walter
Dalkey Archive Press
http://www.dalkeyarchive.com
112 pages; paper, $9.50

As You Were Saying: American Writers Respond to Their French Contemporaries opens with a preface by Jean-David Lévitté, French Ambassador to the US.

Yes, the French Ambassador to the US—writing a preface to a Dalkey Archive Press collection of short fictions, writing that he actually worries about the unwillingness of American publishers to list translated books, writing about the need to reverse this trend, so that French authors, in particular, can “reach new readers...[and] be read in translation in the U.S.”

And, it seems as if Lévitté (not some consultant copywriter) actually wrote the piece—and as if, as he says, he himself really loves “books and was educated by reading literature from all over the world.”

Let’s compare this to the latest “Op/Ed” released by the US Ambassador to France, Craig Roberts Stapleton. In it, he does not celebrate the arrival of a new American intellectual effort in France; rather, he cheers about an upcoming visit from “an American vessel not seen in a French port since May 2001: an aircraft carrier.” No kidding.

As You Were Saying is a successful adventure in illustrating the unpredictable pleasures of encounter, dialogue, and connection.

Okay. Point made, and maybe it’s an easy point, even a cheap shot, but it deserves making because it suggests that while a variety of writers will attempt to create interesting, thoughtful, and successful art—art that develops communication and collaboration between cultures—only some of them have the genuine interest and encouragement of their social leaders.

So we find, in a way, only one voice in what should have been the first collaborative part of this book.

Not so, of course, in the book’s remaining conversations, where French authors Marie Darrieussecq, Camille Laurens, Jacques Roubaud, Lydie Salvaïre, Grégoire Bouillier, Philippe Claudel, and Luc Lang compose joint texts with American writers (respectively) Rick Moody, Robert Olen Butler, Raymond Federman, Rikki Ducornet, Percival Everett, Aleksandar Hemon, and John Edgar Wideman.

Two more-than-impressive groups working together (with the help of translators) under the following, very open-ended arrangement: “The French novelists [composed] the first part of each text, which [was] then translated into English and given to the Americans,” who responded “to it in any way at all: continuation, variation, juxtaposition, contradiction, digression, closure—whatever reaction the initial text inspired.”

The results: Luckily, everything one would hope to find with these writers and these premises. In the Darrieussecq/Moody piece, a female, first-person narrator recounts her complicated, even pathological, love for a horribly disfigured man—a love that centers on his injuries and diminishes when he receives cosmetic surgery that makes him more “normal.” We then receive an interestingly skewed version of events from the point of view of the male character, who desires to become “normal” mostly because he resents the pity fueling his partner’s love.

In both, a shared focus on the depths of characters, and on the psychology of attraction, and love, and even the power of fetish.

Equally cooperative about exploring common characters and themes—Laurens and Olen Butler, who created a unified piece that starts with a lyrically beautiful recitation on the many, many things for which one woman waits, and then builds to a totally different, yet equally charged, dramatic scene that reveals why she waits, and waits, and waits; and Bouillier and Everett, who pass a narrative thread almost seamlessly to explore the desire driving one man’s obsessive pursuit of an unavailable woman.

Some pieces take different, but equally engaging approaches—those by Claudel and Hemon, for example, trace narratives tied more by context or theme than specific characters or plot. In Claudel’s piece, we receive the story of the sterility of upper-middle-class life. In Hemon’s follow-up, one immigrant man’s struggle to achieve just such station (the flaws of which he can’t know). Or, Lang’s and Wideman’s pieces have in common, mostly, shared images and styles.

A few of the pieces don’t seem to connect. From Roubaud’s version of a classical puzzle, the Josephus problem, in which is posed the question of how a soldier not only survives certain death in battle, but in doing so, impresses his victorious enemies so well that they spare him afterward, Federman (from France, though now an American writing in English, mostly) draws only the idea of death, and carcasses, as fuel for his (exceedingly funny) riff on resurrection. From Salvaïre’s tale of a brilliant, ugly man’s pursuit of a dumb, beautiful woman, Ducornet seems to have only taken the idea of a beautiful woman—in her story a whore now past her prime. Interestingly enough, however, these seemingly disconnected stories don’t disappoint; they, in fact, intrigue more than, perhaps, all of the other of the book’s texts. Why, one might speculate, didn’t these writers draw together in expected ways? Why—from the American side of the partnership—did Federman and Ducornet fix on those details from which they spun out seemingly tangential responses? Or are those responses actually tangential or simply more subtly drawn than this reader realizes? These stories encourage thought about not just cooperation and collaboration but about difference and determined autonomy.

In other words, As You Were Saying succeeds in all the ways one of its editors, Esther Allen, hoped it would, as a successful adventure in varieties of talents illustrating the unpredictable pleasures of encounter, dialogue, and connection.

But does the book somehow succeed in illustrating successful cross-cultural collaborations—challenging French writers to find their particular beginnings and American writers to somehow negotiate approaches they wouldn’t have necessarily taken or even considered, perhaps in a distinctly American way? Or do the pieces begin with but then escape national differences, making something outside our usual categories? Yes, and yes, it seems, though this reader doesn’t dare say more, for fear of revealing his inadequate and likely stereotypical assumptions about both cultures. Best read it yourself. Do.

FC2 will publish Matthew Roberson’s new novel, Impotent, in spring 2009.
The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen

Philip Whalen
Edited by Michael Rothenberg
Foreword by Gary Snyder
Introduction by Leslie Scalapino
Wesleyan University Press
http://www.wesleyan.edu/wespress
932 pages; cloth, $49.95

At 932 pages, Philip Whalen’s Collected Poems sprawls like a multi-colored, often magical, rug carpet. The book gathers work from 1947 through 1997 and includes, thankfully, dozens of Whalen’s hand-drawn texts. It’s clearly a labor of love, edited by poet Michael Rothenberg, who co-edited Whalen’s selected poems, Overtime (1999), with Whalen (nearly blind), and cared for the poet in his final years. Many poems will be new to readers; hundreds were never widely available, so that even those familiar with Whalen will discover him over again. There’s a short,fetching remembrance by Gary Snyder, and a provocative introduction by Leslie Scalapino, arguing that Whalen and other Beats work to eradicate barriers, for instance, between the person perceiving and the world perceived (as text). These poets also, I’d add, were part of a shift in self-regard. This led to wide-scale experimentation—in art, lifestyle, sex, and drugs—and to the cultural explosion of the 1960s, a legacy of the modernist “crisis of the subject.” “How do you like your world,” as Whalen to Jack Kerouac in 1960: “you must break yourself to create anything, this I, this self, holes have to be punched, cracks made in it to release the power, beauty, whatever; the act breaks us, a radical force like sex not lightly to be used.

The poems are not so much expressions of an authorial self as kinds of exploration, involving loosening from one’s intentions, akin to Jackson Pollack’s drip paintings and John Cage’s compositions. The poems don’t aspire to elegance and monumentality, even with the book-length Scenes of Life at the Capitol (1970). They are deliberately fluid, deliberately skewed, loosey-goosey. Yet there are moments of great concision and finesse: “Sadly unroll sleeping-bug: // The missing lid for teapot!”

Another noticeable trait is Whalen’s recurrent focus on this, the poems chalkfull with detail, for he writes within a context of the writing itself, plus what’s directly impinging on him, rather than a perspective imagined beyond this, in order “to have the actual issue of the poem,” as Robert Creeley puts it, “in the poem as [he’s] writing it.” This heightened self-regard generally saves Whalen from being ponderous, for there are few moments without self-deprecating humor: and within those moments are subtle renditions of fallibility, renditions central to his innovations on that lyric subject. “Thank God, I don’t have to write a poem,” he begins, in “Birthday Poem”:

All those primulans raving potted hybrids
Mossy brim of brick fish pond
Only the biggest yellow-flowering one
Saves this day from death’s vagrom fingers
Gloom & sad
Thank God none of those who read my poems
don’t see me
Don’t realize I’m crazy, what book shall I carry with me
Lonesome for some own handwriting
A year among strangers, the Japanese all are mad
They look at me, can’t forgive me for being funny-looking
That one’s eating buttered toast in a way I never saw
anybody eat anything.

This is vintage Whalen—the rushed phrasing, stud- ded with details, weird observations, marvelous word choices, and willy-nilly way he leaps line to line. One could read the slightly paranoid, cranky stuff at face value, as representing Whalen, but the ironic opening ploy, the hyperbole and double negative act as signals. In Whalen’s work such renditions actu- ally indicate the lyric subject itself—the speaker—is under scrutiny, namely, whether or not the self is reliably representing the world; obviously, it’s not. As obviously, that playfulness is critical to the cir- cumstance underway and responsible for the rich textural layering of the work. This poet is a master in the use of self-regard.

Bruce Holsapple works as a speech-language pathologist in central New Mexico. His poems have appeared in The Poker, House Organ, Blue Mesa, and First Intensity. A long essay on Philip Whalen is forthcoming in Paideuma. He is the editor of Vox Audio.

Bruce Holsapple

This poet is a master in the use of self-regard.

As one might guess of a Whalen text, it’s full of surprises, for instance, how fast he moves from the stiff early poetry (“Frosted glass alone can screen / The intimate from being seen”) to the fol-

F
Train
Absolutely stoned
Rocking bug-eyed billboards WAFF!
No more bridge than Adam’s cleft
Pouring over 16/36s MPH sodium-
Vapor light yellow light

LOVE YOU!
The poetic here engages and moves with—rather than restricts or steps back from—its content. One can literally feel the involvement. Whalen explained once he’d had a breakthrough on peyote at about this time; the stanza testifies to that. But he was always headed for that openness. As Scalapino notes (in Overtime), Whalen’s the most innovative of the Beats, experimenting with genre, mode, plot, page, topic, style, voice—in fact, nothing literary remains sacrosanct in what might be termed the interrogation of self and subjectivity that is Whalen’s work.

What’s especially interesting about the poems is that they’re rarely organized at a thematic level (problem and resolution). Whalen famously talks of his poetry in 1959 as “a picture or graph of a mind moving,” a comment typifying one aspect of the shift in sensibility under way, for he moves from a plotted,
An artistic statement accompanying the announcement for “Hannah Weiner at Her Job,” a 1970 performance series, begins: “My life is my art. I am my object, a product of the process of self-awareness.” The performances took place in New York’s Garment District where she then worked part-time as a lingerie designer and consisted of a sale of such garments on three successive Wednesdays in March. The piece had to do with the making (and so poesitizing) of a living: “Art is live people,” she writes. “The bikini pants I make sell for 49c and $1.00. If things can’t be free, they should be as cheap as possible. Why waste time and energy to make expensive products that you waste time and energy to afford?” Following a short professional biography, listing the sites for her performance series (events enlisting nautical International Signal Code Flags), the announcement gives a phone number, “for further information.” At 8:32 AM, Monday, June 18, 2007 (37 years and some months late), I tried it, and a machine answered in the International Signal Code Flags, “Thank you for calling Hannah Weiner’s Open House. To write about Hannah Weiner is overwhelming, principally due to dislocations, including the temporal one above. In part, her aberrant sensibility and thinking process in roughly the last third of her life (from the early 1970s to her death in 1997), diagnosed with schizophrenia, makes this so. This period covers her main writing period (following her sixties’ performances), making “split mind” an interrupted form…. My writing above is an interrupted form…. My writing above represents both minds or the complete mind, is an interrupted form…. My writing above is interrupted by mind 2 that is simultaneously preparing the next sentence or answering a question. Therefore the correct form to represent both minds or the complete mind, is an interrupted form…. My writing above and below the line incorporates some of this simultaneity. Linear writing must leave out many simultaneous thoughts and events. I am trying to show the mind. —Hannah Weiner, “Mostly About the Sentence” (with Andrew Schelling)

The sentence is always interrupted. Mind that shuffles out, or series, is interrupted by mind 2 that is simultaneously preparing the next sentence or answering a question. Therefore the correct form to represent both minds or the complete mind, is an interrupted form…. My writing above and below the line incorporates some of this simultaneity. Linear writing must leave out many simultaneous thoughts and events. I am trying to show the mind. —Hannah Weiner, “Mostly About the Sentence” (with Andrew Schelling)

A great boon of Hannah Weiner’s Open House lies in gathering her career-wide formal inflections in one place for the first time.

Working near the end of the age of formal manifestos—from Karl Marx’s to Joseph Buey’s 1970 signing of George Maciunas’s 1963 Fluxus “Manifesto”—Hannah Weiner took the “time and energy” economy of her performance art to expose what such a “making a living” might mean in the quickness (in multiple senses) possible to word works: How such might make a self and how we are each a “manifesto” when our attention is there. There is certainly a transfer of sixties’ art processes: Hannah Weiner’s use of found objects (“WORDS I see”); collaboration (her voices); “happening” mimicking natural operations (chance) as they apply to mind’s nature but distinct from John Cage, say, in her use of acheingly personal material; and immediacy, so that the act of writing/reading is integral to what is written/read. Particularly, the last attribute gives her work a counter-intuitively nonliterary (and so in part contemporary) edge. Her writing projects offer almost no rhetorical points of purchase, and it is not naiveté on the part of Weiner, a Radcliffe graduate, but of utility, eschewing distraction: A poetics of immediacy—one might even posit of “ternality,” as from her writing there is no turning (in or out), except to face the con implicit to language itself—such a strain patent, say, in Herman Melville’s 1851 letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne that concludes: “Take God out of the dictionary, and you would have Him in the street.”

That’s in Weiner’s simple statement, “My life is my art,” but again the unique vector she took to its radical limit seems to lie in part in “self-awareness” as process, the product of which, “my object,” is “I am.” In this object’s form, with its radial and hyperbolic ‘I’, there is no “other” individuality: If “I am” is an object, who is writing “I am”? Exploding that, text becomes flat, and rather than proving the world so, it forces a reader into her or his own curvature, albeit “does it or you begin?” Such language-squashing works may be found in a boisterous company of artists local to her scene; for example, in Ugly Duckling Presse’s recent compilation of the late-sixties literary journal 0-9, edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer. With Mayer, Weiner’s works in turn have been reckoned one of the cardinal bridges between the sixties’ poetry scene in New York and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movements (indeed, Charles Bernstein is her estate executor): In that one might persuasively pose that aspects of New York (School) performance art carried into letters literally—not literally, if such distinction may hold—set $L=A=N=G=U=A=GE$’s key or at least its New York timbre. In terms of contemporary importance, Durgin himself posits that Weiner’s “influence can be seen today in the so-called ‘New Narrative’ work stemming from the San Francisco Bay Area,” while in turn the current “non-creative” writing tranche bears her mark.

This play of lineage, however, pales to what is spoken to our own immediacy out of Hannah Weiner’s writing, and a great boon of Hannah Weiner’s Open House lies in gathering her career-wide formal inflections in one place for the first time. It signals another way in which Hannah Weiner overwhelms, as reading one scrambles to place the leaps between, say, the leeching of text by number sets in “The Zero One,” significantly with the first-person pronoun “I” displacing the number “1,” treating the Mayan genocides in Guatemala; her meditation “Written In” (subtitled “Written in a blank book called Homo Futurus by Barbara Rosenthal”) on the “bound” book—

Not to tease the mind
Not to blip the alpha wave
Not to challenge the language
Just get from side to side
Get to another bottom
Realize limits

ON THIS PAGE
—a work set by Durgin as Weiner typewrote it (as “The Zero One”), respecting those occasions in which her work as formed through act are naturally inviolate; her late-70s series Little Books/Indians, happening (as in Cagian) transcripts of what Weiner saw on the page in her synesthetic clairovoyance as well as literally on the inside of her forehead, set in nerver, paratactic, and tightly enjambed sans-punctual (or what might slow and so lose razor breadth of breath) jolts, so that the mediums (including our selves) have no place to go it is so close; and the psyche-raking groundwork of Clairvoyant Journal 1974: March–June Retreat, which is among the twentieth century’s last revolutionary sustained acts of conscious composition.

Truitt continued on next page
In this clairvoyant work, coming after and to the 1980 essay “Language-Centered” by Jackson Mac Low, Weiner’s tri-vocal form is reminiscent of Stéphane Mallarmé’s “space” or “emplacement.” As readers, this includes each of us, who are inextricably involved. “I am,” she states: “I am trying to understand through my continued writing which of these WORDS I see are 1) my own ordinary conscious thought; 2) from my developed superconscious mind which has precognitive clairvoyant powers; 3) telepathic connections with living people; 4) BIG QUESTION communications from non-living forces.” While to “understand” such might lie outside the text, what we have in Clairvoyant Journal are records of sessions in which she seeks to render meticulously what she experiences in her mind in language as they bear. There are thus three streams woven like French braids, though not symmetrically (what is the shape of the mind?), identified in part by typography: the capitalized words are those Hannah Weiner saw in her forehead (from inside her mind); in italics, a second heard voice; and in regular type, her own voice. The three voices may be further identified, as Weiner does, by qualities, wherein the first tends to order and advise (a futurity); the second, to comment (a reflexive past); and the third, her own voice, to relate what’s on her mind (at present), noting it describes more often than not what is happening as she writes in her environment, including riffs off the voices occurring in/to that, viz. her May 4th entry:

HANNAH THIS IS THE BEST PAGE

HANNAH THIS IS MAY

M 4 p 2

no sex appeal 3 more ears realize write something you are documenting it you hear GINSENG over the radio rather than see it You buy a plant that flashed even after it said IT WAS JUPITER

A WARNING you’ve been up since 7 and haven’t stopped yet

What is striking is that while the distinctions that allow for the text appearances are unique to her particular synesthesia, as perhaps hearing voices with its schizophrenic tag is not so much, what those (dis) abilities make possible is common: Namely, we have competing thoughts (voices), the distinction of which we have managed to suppress (reminiscient of Little Books/Indians, with its “1” for 1, our Western acro- nym for a totality). In fact, Weiner’s tri-vocal form may even be grossly Freudian, though what belies this is Weiner insistence on another possible verbal activity: “‘enargia’ is, to overwhelm? commonly to overthrow, or turn upside down, but the Middle English word whelmen from which the verb derives means itself on its own “to turn upside down.” As a verb, to say a thing overwhelm, then, equals “to turn upside down over”—like taking, say, what we each see in a mirror of our eyes and face and becoming the mirror seeing ourselves. In initial terms, this would be an operation of taking what is (which already in words is a turn, or tropic) and pass it through a flip, returning “it” as it was, though charged (more than changed) through that act. Words are words, so it is implausible to identify a change on a surface except “self” ("TALES") or reflexively, how it is related to a location, a flip-split. To call the Clairvoyant Journal overwhelming, then (and revolutionary in this specific sense), means that there exists in it, as well as in later works emerging along its vector, something topical, as of the Greek “place.” It is the nature of that topicality, achieved overwhelmingly, that interests.

One way to touch on that is through the 1980 essay “Language-Centered” by Jackson Mac Low, Weiner’s colleague and friend. In this, he proposes that the consciousness-bearing load of a literary product is “perceive-centered,” suggesting that the mind of the reader is a work’s “object of imitation.” He posits: “There is certainly a sense in which perceivers are perceiving their own minds at work when they sense meanings in these verbal words.” A poem, then, might operate to objectify mind—and perhaps to do so completely—as an act (performance) in a temporal (and so entropic) field. Or following on “energy,” from the Greek word meaning “at work,” one might place such a perceivable-centric stance as enargia, in the Greek meaning “shining” (“visible, palpable, manifest”), employed as a rhetorical term for “visually powerful, vivid description which recreates something or someone, as several theorists say, ‘before your very eyes;’ vigorous ocular demonstration.” Similar to ekphrasis, the description of a static object, such as a work of art, enargia is differentiated by its characteristic immediacy, as of a sudden confrontation. While it may in language appear phenomenally, word to word, in time, energia denotes the sudden—it operation more a process of catching up to a moment than refusing sand grains into a mirroring description. Along with its visual registry—the fact of Weiner’s synthetistic ability (“I SEE WORDS”)—it is the above-quoted “speed I was seeing things” suddenness that I would distinguish as energic.

But what occurs to Mac Low’s reader “perceiving their own minds” if the “object of imitation” is “complete mind” and so includes them? The transcriptive process itself is plausible (even clear and cogent): It is the fact of its execution (Weiner’s “ability,” as Durgin emphasizes), including the necessary attention to catch and render it, and its result (our reading, and perhaps inability) that is complex—and from a normative purchase perhaps infinitely so.

What characterizes Clairvoyant Journal, and much of what followed of her work, is that its reading requires a similarly enargic immediacy. First, her writing’s flat surface, absent mimicry—it doesn’t recall—makes this so, continually subverting outward reflection. The writing is non-referential in a substantive way: You can, for example, switch out many proper and improper nouns without diminution of information. Switch but not reverse, because work is being done here and so occurs in entropic irreversibility. What is transmitted in an enargic word grid is energy (including our own) as the information worth locating and reading. While one might posit then that words interrupt—or as she writes, “The sentence is always interrupted”—they don’t because they hold it and us. But erasure is involved: burs (words) and blues (sentences). But what if mind is a series of interruptions (attempts to render which typographically result in intercessional and slashing/slanting words between and through fragments) is a reader reading? If Weiner is transcribing text as found objects (via eye and ear), could one say that in fact she is rendering a manifest of her reading? If so, where and what is the mind in this phenomenological transaction?

Concretely, I would say that for Weiner her “object of imitation” is metaleptically the page—or as I quote above, “realize limits / ON THIS PAGE.” In imitation lies mind’s infinity, contextualized as randomness (chance potentiality) versus a fixed pattern. Such calls again to Mallarmé and his “ONE TOSS OF THE DICE,” a work of conscious composition that started the last century:

FROM THE DEPTHS OF A SHIPWRECK

WHETHER

Abyss

whitened

recalled

furious

under an inclination

glides desperately with wing

—wherein those words’ spacing “is” is. In Clairvoyant Journal, you can almost talk over the waves to Weiner in the clarity of a spatial music that is the magic of a secret world—its recognition launching toward that simultaneity that is immediate apprehension—of the splashes, spurs, and blurs words and the phrases they constellate co-bear, weave, out of and into time. They imitate energy; frame our own. The root topicality of Weiner’s experiment/experience is that. Weiner sees energy, and its rendering into energia that which overwhelmed, the time of which words mark, reflecting “self-awareness,” a flicker (spurt, spurt, and blur).

Or this is a reading, partial and un-split, which is never whole because always a start, or natural (natus, “born”). And there remains much to say to the fire. I would only add what Bernadette Mayer told me in conversation some months back: “Hannah did what she did so that we don’t have to.” She was referring in part to what I would read as Weiner’s wheel of root, extremity, and pain (with the last term somewhat complicated), but what is important is for each in and on his or her own locate “what she did.” In her Hannah Weiner’s Open House, a way there is now here to find.

Sam Traut is the author of Vertical Elegies 5: The Section (University of Georgia Press), Anamorphosis Eisenhower (Lost Roads), as well as the forthcoming Vertical Elegies: Three Works (Ugly Duckling Press), and Street Mete: A Work in Vertical Elegies (Palm).
Trungpa was a cult leader, especially in the wake of the 1978 People’s Temple suicides.

Ginsberg’s later poems in defense of pedophilia are perhaps suggested or countenanced by the sexual excesses of his guru. Is Crazy Wisdom a poetic license that allows Sadism and pedophilia? Is there a legacy of this in this tradition? If you stick with the Buddhist clause alone, there is much to wrangle with in terms of the title of this book. Ginsberg defends the poets’ aristocracy, and also the right of gurus (and presumably great poets) to strip and humiliate and even kill whom they please in the name of wisdom. Trigilio relies heavily and insightfully on Ginsberg’s diary entries and interviews from the period. This is Ginsberg talking to Tom Clark about Naone in Boulder Monthly: “In the middle of that scene, to yell ‘call the police!’ do you realize how vulgar that was? The Wisdom of the East was being unveiled, and she’s going, ‘call the police!’ I mean, shit! Fuck that shit! Strip ‘em naked, break down the door!”

The author does stipulate that Ginsberg’s Buddhism is light years from Gary Snyder’s, but he does so only glancingly and never sketches out fully in what these differences consist. But he doesn’t sketch out for us the differences that matter either. It is hard to imagine the Dalai Lama forcibly stripping women while dead drunk on a Halloween night in 1976, and it is hard to imagine him condoning such a practice.

The second chapter deals with Ginsberg’s Gay Dharma. This chapter needs to show a more complete investigation of the acceptance of homosexuality within Buddhism. Most of the major religions frown on the practice. Does Buddhism accept homosexuality?

Ginsberg’s aggression toward Buddhism needs to be carefully positioned when we think of Ginsberg as a “Buddhist.”

Chapter 3: Trungpa as father, and the Oedipal connotations. The author does a very good job tracing Louis Ginsberg as poet and father, but since Louis Ginsberg was not a Buddhist, does this belong in this book? What does belong is a serious and prolonged look at Trungpa. Trungpa’s life is well-recorded. He drove a motorcycle and injured himself severely in his youth. He had a record of severely abusing women and also horses. He drank himself to death in his early forties. He was not older than Ginsberg. If anything, Ginsberg was the elder, and certainly Ginsberg had the more authority as a poet. Trungpa’s fame is as a guru. I don’t know of anyone aside from Ginsberg himself who took or takes Trungpa seriously as an English language poet, or would use Trungpa’s poems as the basis for their own poetics. Ginsberg’s sources are deep in the English and American tradition: Charles Reznikoff, Walt Whitman, William Blake. Trigilio skillfully discusses that tradition but often implies that Trungpa’s influence is equal to or greater than these.

Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence model requires a STRONG POET. Trungpa is hardly a strong poet. He is, however, a recognized figure within a STRONG TRADITION. Ginsberg—a Jew on the lam from Judaism—was trying to find a strong tradition. But he also wanted to subvert it. Trungpa, a weak man in a strong lineage, was probably the most likely guru for him. The Dalai Lama would have put Ginsberg in his place, as would Gary Snyder’s teachers, and the outcome might have been much different. Ginsberg’s aggression toward Buddhism—his attempt to use this great tradition as a puppet master might—needs to be carefully positioned when we think of Ginsberg as a “Buddhist.”

Chapter 4: The use of LSD as sacrament. Ginsberg’s attempt to introduce LSD into America as a sacrament, as a way to get to know God, resulted in probably hundreds of thousands of deaths and serious mental illness for millions of youth. Ginsberg’s attempt to ally LSD with Buddhist practice, again, would hardly be condoned by the Dalai Lama or other high figures within Buddhism. One of the author’s central contentions is that Buddhist practice attempts to do away with the subject. LSD also decentralized and can certainly speed up this process. Yes, but so fast? Many Buddhist practitioners have warned against short-cuts.

Chapter 5: “The Mugging.” This is perhaps the most complete treatment of any one of Ginsberg’s poems. It is not usually considered a major poem, but it is a tremendously interesting one. The author leaves much out of the poem. Ginsberg is mugged by Puerto Rican kids outside of his own residence. That they were Puerto Ricans in itself is interesting but is not even mentioned by the author. The neighborhood is Spanish-speaking. Ginsberg ends up seeking help in a “bodega,” Spanish for grocery store. The economic climate of the Lower East Side in the seventies is one in which great numbers of impoverished gangs terrorized Ginsberg’s neighborhood. While Ginsberg gets mugged, he chants to try to calm the kids. Instead, this pisses them off, and they threaten to kill him if he doesn’t shut up. The comedy of Ginsberg’s misapplication of the mantra nearly results in a final tragedy. This time Ginsberg himself is more than willing to talk to the police:

External surveillance fails—the police do nothing—and internal surveillance prevents the neighbors from endangering themselves by volunteering as witnesses. Seen now as an other, the speaker, as a crime victim, is dislocated from the spatializing identity of his own neighborhood. Officers help the speaker search for his wallet using a flashlight that is “broken” with “no eyebeam.”

There is a sense in which Ginsberg tried to build a Buddhist poetics based on the breadth-line. This has an antecedent in Charles Olson’s work, but Ginsberg tries to synthesize this work with Buddhist practice and with “mindfulness.”

The author attempts to understand Buddhist aesthetics especially in the line of poetics and especially within the Tibetan tradition, or the Crazy Wisdom School. The attempts to link it to Blake have
already been done, and are recuperated throughout. But Blake isn’t Buddhist. My question is whether Ginsberg ever really left the Western framework. Even in late works he still uses the term “Gnosticism,” as a description of his work. Since the Gnostics do believe in God, albeit a completely unbalanced and vicious one, I find it hard to put this together with the Buddha call to content. The contention that Ginsberg is an Orientalist in Edward Said’s terminology needs to be taken more seriously, but it would also be interesting to see the Orientalism of the 1960s and 1970s literary worlds in which Ginsberg put his money on Tibet while most of the Tel Quel School of Paris (Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan) put their money on Maoist China.

Ginsberg’s choice remains timely as we watch horror as Tibetan citizens are beaten and silenced by Chinese communist soldiers who continue to try to erase Tibet as a cultural entity. This book does much to put the issue back on the map, but fails to reveal the shortcomings of either variety of Orientalism.

Kirby Olson is the author of Andrei Codrescu & the Myth of America (McFarland, 2005) and Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist (Southern Illinois University Press, 2002). He is currently an associate professor of humanities at SUNY-Delhi.

**Anthology Issues**

**AVERY: AN ANTHOLOGY OF NEW FICTION**
Edited by Stephanie Fiorelli, Adam Koehler, and Andrew Palmer
Avery House Press
http://www.averyanthology.org
248 pages; paper; $10.00

When Story magazine ceased publication in the winter of 2000, the world of short fiction lost one of the best forums for showcasing work by emerging and established authors. Over the course of its nearly seventy-year history and in its various incarnations, the editors of Story magazine consistently discovered an impressive array of new voices from J. D. Salinger and Truman Capote to Junot Diaz and ZZ Packer. Story magazine favored those writers who embraced the challenges and rewards of the short form over the glitz and financial glory of the novel. The magazine boasted a literary and a general readership—my dentist subscribed—significant circulation and distribution, and, through its contests and honorariums, generous compensation for its authors. In short, Story magazine was responsible for discovering and supporting numerous careers, for creating a far-reaching literary community, and for serving as a reliable arbiter of taste. Though numerous literary publications have emerged since Story folded, no single journal has picked up the mantle in support of short fiction, in fact many periodicals—The Atlantic Monthly, GQ, Esquire, Redbook—have either pulled back on their publication of short fiction, limited their fiction to a single special issue, or eliminated it all together.

The great pleasure is in seeing how the short fiction tradition is built upon, skewed, and subverted.

Short-sighted editors are often blamed for this trend away from publishing short stories, but why not raise the question of whether or not short fiction has done enough to attract and sustain a committed and enthusiastic audience? Does short fiction matter? Is short fiction worthy of a reader’s attention, and are writers of short fiction doing enough to attract, delight, and provoke an audience? Have short story writers moved beyond the satisfactions of easy epiphanies and clever formal exercises into the realm of narrative innovation? Can a reader still discover something meaningful about the human condition within the pages of a short story?

The first issue of Avery: An Anthology of New Fiction edited by Stephanie Fiorelli, Adam Koehler, and Andrew Palmer brings with it the answers to some of these questions and the promise of an exciting and engaging new biannual publication focusing entirely on short fiction. Issue 1 of Avery is an attractive collection of nineteen stories, each with original artwork by Seth Sanders. Much like Story magazine, Avery, according to the editors’ note, is committed to publishing “established, emerging, and overlooked authors.” The elder statesman of this inaugural edition is the prolific Stephen Dixon whose story, “Memoir,”—written ironically and playfully in the third person—establishes an editorial preference for the postmodern, the experimental, and, perhaps unexpectedly, the domestic. “Memoir” explores a dying man’s attempt to type up the story of his life while imagining a world after his death. “Resumes typing: ‘He’s very sick, that’s all. Doesn’t want to die but knows he will in a few weeks. That’s how bad off he is. How advanced his illness is. He’s going to miss so much.’ Though Dixon is known for his metafictional extravagance, his stories are ultimately grounded by the challenges and limitations of familial and sexual relationships. One of Avery’s strengths editorially is that nearly all of the stories share a kindred connection to the spirit if not the letter of Dixon’s work, and the anthology as a whole serves as a kind of testament to Dixon’s legacy. Maybe future issues will be organized around a similar principle showcasing different established authors and the writers they’ve influenced.

As a rule, the stories in this anthology are unusually short and compressed. Of the nineteen collected, twelve are under ten pages, and only two are over twenty pages. There is a clear preference for first-person narratives—barely a third of the stories are told in third-person—and most of the first-person narrators are heavily voiced and stylized. Chad Simpson’s “Tell Everyone I Said Hi” offers a powerful look at the things that would happen to a single special issue, or eliminated it all together. Ander Monson’s “Five Submerged Missives” is a dreamy, gorgeous anti-love story. “Think this is a kind of love. A sample. Interest without the obligation of a kiss.” Monson’s sectioned structure evokes but does not merely imitate the pointillism of William Gass’s Myth of America. “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country.” Leigh Newman’s “How Monster is Monster?” explores the sacrifices a couple living in a tiny apartment makes when they combine their domestic lives. The monster is an inherited antique dresser that takes on the same power and heightened symbolism as John Cheever’s own enormous radio. All of these stories are indebted to the short fiction tradition, but the great pleasure is in seeing how this tradition is built upon, skewed, and subverted.

In terms of pure storytelling, the most well-plotted and satisfying narratives are Curtis Smith’s high-school noir, “The Girl In The Halo,” about a missing girl and the boy who may or may not have taken her life; Daniel Levin Becker’s romantic mystery of credit-card payments and piano compositions, “Incidental Music”; and Steven Church’s tale of an

Amber Dernmont

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apocryphal Guinness Book of World Record holder, “The Apprentice in Stillness.” All of these stories investigate their characters’ obsessions, reveal the human capacity to simultaneously love and do harm, and offer surprising twists that are organic to the plot without any hint of contrivance. These stories trust the reader enough to resist closure, and, though the stories are conceptually innovative, they are told in a formally classical manner that heightens the emotional resonance. Two additional stories that are also brilliantly developed and scenically driven, Mary E. Fiorenza’s “The Woman Who Became Her House” and Andrew Roe’s “Burn,” bring the reader right up to a precipice of tension and then undermine their narratives with unnecessary point-of-view shifts.

Only a few of the pieces feel extraneous and risk detracting from the overall impact of the anthology. Christian TeBordo’s lyrically titled “Sweet William, Don’t Even Bother Denying It” has bursts of disjunctive humor but suffers from a first-person narrator hell-bent on bullying both Sweet William and the reader. Mike Young’s prose poem, “Sunday Morning Spread,” struggles with issues of clarity. The line “Marie’s buns feel like oily spaghetti” beggs the question to whom? To Marie? To another character? To the reader? A leaner anthology that collected a dozen equally strong stories might have a greater impact on a reader.

The editors’ decision to call Avery an anthology as opposed to a literary journal, especially since none of these stories have been previously published, strikes me as an unnecessary attempt to heighten the publication’s importance. Anthologies are usually formulated around a theme, an occasion, or a “Best” of syndrome. A stronger editorial hand might pay closer attention to why particular stories benefit from being anthologized together. I also couldn’t help but notice that of the nineteen stories included, only five were written by women. I won’t attempt to profile the names or bias for race and ethnicity, but let’s just say that there doesn’t seem to be much here in the way of diversity. Why do gender disparity and lack of ethnic and racial diversity matter— I suppose mainly because they point to a potential lack of aesthetic diversity, of a narrowing of taste, of a disquieting sameness. Though I don’t believe journals or anthologies need to be policed for any kind of specific quotas, I do think that a journal that prides itself on representing “established, emerging, and overlooked authors” could easily also pride itself on other types of representation. It is up to the editors to seek out and showcase as many different voices as possible to something that Story magazine in its final years took heavily to heart.

Avery is a worthy publication—worthy of attention, worthy of a readership, and worthy of continued support from its benefactors. Readers and writers alike should look forward to issue 2.

Amber Dermont is an assistant professor of English and creative writing at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia.

### The Years of Smashing Bricks: An Anecdotal Memoir

Richard Katrovas

Carnegie Mellon University Press

http://www.cmu.edu/universitypress

134 pages; paper, $16.95

In The Years of Smashing Bricks, Richard Katrovas makes use of the sunny and idyllic background of Coronado and San Diego to offset this dark, troubled, and often emotionally and sometimes physically painful coming-of-age story. Katrovas calls this his “anecdotal memoir” and offers it to the reader, “I’ve tried not to embellish too much, though I’ve probably failed miserably at restraining a natural inclination to render the world, if not my life, more intriguing than it is.” It is true that Katrovas has a tendency to make the events in the work seem to have more meaning than they probably did at the time, but he does not aim for absolute historical accuracy; rather, he is more interested in presenting poignant retellings of those moments in life that hold more significance in later retellings than in the initial moment of the events.

The work’s nonlinear chronicle of Katrovas’s late teen and early twenties during a tumultuous time in American history is an account full of the misfits, diversity, and emotional naiveté displayed and preserved in the various anecdotes. Young Katrovas’s unseemly acquaintances are a refuge from his troubled family life. In his early teens, he and his brother are adopted by his father’s sister and spend two years living on a military base in Japan. Katrovas’s home life with his adopted-mother/aunt is a torturous place for hells she is outright hostile and stingy, to the young man, and his stepfather, a low-ranking Naval Officer, is fairly distant and offers no guidance or warmth for the young man. The only spiritual center that young Katrovas can turn to is the Kata—a highly ritualized form of karate that he was taught while living in Japan. As the memoir proceeds, Katrovas leaves markers to anchor the tumultuous path that young Katrovas fully matures; rather, he must see Katrovas’s emotional growth and coming of age is also nonlinear. He seems to “learn” a lesson only to regress in a chronologically later moment.

Katrovas at times seems to be dressing up over-sentimentalized memories of a painful young adulthood with seemingly profound observations.

The continual mention of the older woman in the novel helps to anchor the tumultuous path that young Katrovas takes to adulthood. However, the relationship with Louanna is an unstable one and crumbles apart under the weight of Louanna’s unexpressed desire for her former marriage and young Katrovas’s blinding indolent desires. The relationship’s instability also comes from Katrovas’s inexperience and the narcissism common to a nineteen-year-old. Katrovas explains, “I loved Louanna in my fashion, which is to say obsessively and falsely. I loved my idea of loving her, of course my idea of love, and therefore I loved only an extension of myself.” As the anecdotes continue, the young Katrovas begins to understand that those around him are not extensions of himself. This does not mean that by the end of the stories that shaped his life and that mirrored the confusion of the nation in the early 1970s.

In one particularly memorable passage, young Katrovas’s coworker and friend Mickey Rutter needs to leave town in a hurry. Like he does with many of the pieces in this work, Katrovas paints a gritty and sometimes dim picture of his younger life and the people that he knew. Mickey has gotten an under-age girl pregnant and asks their elderly boss Esther for money. At a seemingly low moment in Mickey’s and hitting the brick (or rock), he lifts it imperceptibly above the ground and brings it down, breaking it. Like this visual trick that Katrovas performs on-demand at parties, The Year of Smashing Bricks appears to be attempting to trick the reader. At times, it seems as if Katrovas is dressing up over-sentimentalized memories of a painful young adulthood with seemingly profound observations—“In advance of love, in anticipation, my heart was already broken, though I wouldn’t know for years.” However, a thorough read reveals a deep, emotional resonance with the events and people that shaped his life and that mirrored the confusion of the nation in the early 1970s.

Gabriel Cutrufello

The Years of Smashing Bricks

A Anecdotal Memoir

Richard Katrovas

Gabriel Cutrufello

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the author’s life, Katrovas looks out the window to observe the beauty of the ordinary: Outside, through Esther Hale’s window, palm trees sway in the new light. Military stuff began to grind its portion of a good day down to usable material. Just minutes ago, it seemed, our country had lost a war, or had been lost in it. But this was a new day. Lessons had been learned. The sky over Coronado was open for business, and no one, not even Mickey Rutter, would miss the formal beauty of it all. In the midst of the repercussions of the Vietnam War and the dubious actions of Mickey, Katrovas sees a beauty in the world. In large part, his ability to see this “formal beauty” comes from his grounding in the Kata. Although the dancer insists that the performer look inward for the grace and stability necessary to perform the dance, it sharpens the performer’s ability to look outward. This ability is Katrovas’s real power as a writer; he is able to see the beauty in the tortured and lost people of his early years.

Instead of smashing bricks, the novel performs the Kata dance that young Katrovas returns to throughout the novel. Like the highly stylized form of karate that only those who have mastered the various moves of karate can perform, The Years of Smashing Bricks could only be written by someone who has a keen sense of writing. It is a work that incorporates all that Katrovas has learned in his earlier years and joins them together in a display of fluidity. The Kata represents a series of defenses, attacks, and counter-attacks against multiple invisible enemies; the end result is a beautiful display of physical prowess. In The Year of Smashing Bricks, Katrovas accomplishes a similar feat; he fluidly combines a variety of events and people from his youth to create a series of portraits that respond to old hurts and triumphs and resonate with a larger audience.

Gabriel Cutrufello is a graduate student in the English Department at Temple University in Philadelphia.

**THE TOP TEN:**
**WRITERS PICK THEIR FAVORITE BOOKS**

Edited by J. Peder Zane
Norton
http://www.wwnorton.com
352 pages; paper, $14.95

The millennium, Norman Cohn argued in his classic study, The Pursuit of the Millennium (1957), had long functioned to provide “consolation and guidance” for communities wracked by uncertainty, and desperately desiring some form of closure. Millenarians sought not just an end to a world filled with frivolous pastimes, but a deeper, more serious, final accounting: a judgment that would divide good from bad. Yet, when the millennium arrived, the stars did not fall through the heavens like fine dust. The righteous dead were not resurrected. Hardened sinners were not killed by tempests, floods, or plagues. De-nied a divine accounting, editors and book-sellers—who sometimes seemed to be driven by equivalent millennial energies—were forced to act on their own initiative. As the millennium drew closer, the book list (composed of best books, of must-read books, of most influential books) became their way of ordering and settling the literary past.

The most famous of these millennial lists was probably the Modern Library’s selection of the Twentieth Century’s 100 Best Books in English, which was topped by James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922). There were, however, countless other competing lists, including the American Book Review’s 1999 (20.6) response to the limitations of the Modern Library’s list in the form of Larry McCaffery’s “The 20th Century’s Greatest Hits,” a hierarchy of 100 books in which Ulysses was edged into second position by Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire (1962). Such lists may be, as Don DeLillo has suggested, “a form of cultural hysteria.” Nevertheless, their continued appeal is demonstrated by the appearance of J. Peder Zane’s The Top Ten, a book which seems to distill most of the list-compiling energies of the millennium book industry into one volume. The Top Ten is really three different books squeezed together. First of all, it collects the lists that give the book its name—a compilation of top ten lists of the “greatest works of fiction of fiction of all time” selected by 125 “leading writers.” Second, there are short essays—three offering a sort of overview of the lists, and eighteen “appreciations” of individual works by writers eager to expand upon the reasons for their selection. Finally, the book includes a 184-page “Guide to the World’s Best Books”—basically a series of capsule summaries of each of the 544 titles that the writers cumulatively selected.

There are certainly problems with this overall design. Zane never makes it clear why these 125 writers were selected, rather than 125 other writers, beyond the fact that they are “leading” and “important.” Indeed, sometimes, as you try and trace a thread through the list of different listing writers, it’s hard to sense any other connection than that these were the 125 authors who actually replied to Zane’s invitation. More problematic are the capsule summaries, which are probably the weakest part of the book, comprising the section that looks most like it’s been included to pad the volume out. It’s almost too easy to make fun of this endeavor: feel like reading an 88-word summary of Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time (1913–1927) that doesn’t mention Albertine? Maybe a 68-word summary of William Gaddis’s JR (1975)? Or, better still, an 87-word summary of Finnegans Wake (1939)? Of course such summaries sound awful, and there are certainly low points. Zane, for example, sometimes insists on making his summaries sound like commercials for bad movies, so Henrik Ibsen’s Nora Helmer is recast as “[t]he original housewife. But really this section of the book is flawed in conception rather than in practice. It’s hard to imagine any really useful summaries being compressed in such a short space, and the book would be stronger without them.

**With the right writer, the list can be a revealing window on to their formative influences.**

The lists themselves vary widely, depending upon how seriously a given author took the process. David Foster Wallace’s top ten, for example, seems so satirical that it’s hard to imagine him keeping a straight face long enough to mail his selection—none of his obvious reference points (Gaddis, DeLillo, Joyce) are present, but in their place there’s Stephen King, Thomas Harris (twice), and Tom Clancy. Similarly, Annie Proulx prefaces her list with the claim that the entire project is “pointless” and insists that she’s submitting a list “Just so you’ll give it a rest.” Reading such lists, then, is unlikely to shed much light on the author’s practice.

Having said that, when the writers’ lists do seem to engage more fully with an author’s work, The Top Ten becomes a pretty interesting atlas of different authors’ obsessions. Richard Powers, for example, has included not a top ten, but a list of nine books that would have been his top choice depending on his age (his top choices are arranged at five-year intervals, running from age 5 to 45). The temporal spread is revealing. While Powers at 20 and 25 favored Joyce’s Ulysses and Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851), respectively, at 35 and 38 he seems to have himself drawn to Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations (1860–1861) and Willa Cather’s My Antonia (1918). The progression from the encyclopedic spirit of Joyce and Melville, toward more obviously emotive, character-driven novels, seems to parallel the arc of his own work, even down to the fact that both My Antonia and Powers’s The Echo Maker (2006) take place in Nebraska.

The quantitative conclusions of the exercise are also provocative, providing a snapshot of which works matter to these contemporary writers. What’s immediate, deep, and obvious, perhaps, is how much deeper into literary history for their selections, rather than picking out the works of their immediate literary ancestors. Most selections are safely from the distant past (Anna Karenina [1877] comes top overall), and there are few works by contemporary writers. In fact, the recent works that are selected are sometimes surprising: nobody, for example, selected Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), though V. (1963) did make one list (T. C. Boyle’s). And DeLillo, who is so often said to be the most influential living writer, similarly only secures one vote (again, from Boyle).

Indeed, as Zane observes, viewed cumulatively, “The 1920s proved the most popular decade,” which might suggest the continued hold that modernism has over the contemporary imagination. Like most lists, then, this book is an uneven affair, gathering together items of vastly different value. But while William Gass, in an essay on lists in Texts of Time (2002), has warned that “the comforts of mere enumeration are shallow and illusory,” the strongest part of this book is undoubtedly the moment when writers enumerate the books that have mattered most to them. With the right writer, the list can be a revealing window on to their formative influences.

The Human Line is an apt title for Ellen Bass’s new book of poetry, with its clear, understated dic-
tion and imagery, its balanced portraits of humans in relationship to each other and the environment. The
opening poems grapple with the narrator’s mother dying. Their lines are rhythmically dynamic and
remarkably unsentimental. Yet, the reader may resist, having read too many poems by Boomers about dy-
ing parents. The resisting reader gives in when s/he arrives at the seventh poem, “Last Night.” The direct
dialogue and the poet’s own first name draw us in:

Mom, I try again, lie down.
I’ll lie down with Ellen, she says,
a wary edge in her voice.

I climb into the narrow bed,
my body a breath away from hers

The diction is immediate and stripped of figu-
ративный. Intimacy deepens, between the nar-
rator and the mother, between reader and poet. The
reader leans in. “The End” repays listening, confid-
ing a mortal secret. The poet and her daughter have
poured morphone down the dying mother’s throat:
“And we kept at it together, both of us, / killing her
poured morphine down the dying mother’s throat:

And even she had withdrawn
to the bright kitchen, to smear a bagel
with the pungent white fish spread
she’d begun, in spite of herself, to love.

White fish spread is considered a delicacy
among many Jewish families; it may at first offer
an alien taste to the woman in orange. The hospital
worker, like the reader, finds herself developing a
taste and affection for what at first seemed “other.”
Ellen Bass’s new volume juxtaposes a variety
of moods and tones. In section two, we are treated
to wit and humor. “Asking Directions in Paris” will
delight anyone who has ever asked for directions in
a foreign country. The Parisian woman seems to the
narrator to be saying: “On the corner / he is a shop of
jewels in a fountain / when the hotel arrives on short
feet.” To her credit, the author deepens the metaphor
at the end of the poem:

And as you thank her profusely
and set off full of groundless hope,
you think this must be how it is
with destiny: God explaining
and explaining what you must do,
and all you can make out are a few
unconnected phrases, a word or two, a wave
in what you pray is the right direction.

“Gate C22,” the next poem, is sensual and deli-
cious. Once again, the reader has an intimate view:
this time, we become spectators along with an airport
passenger watching a middle-aged couple make out:
The whole wing of the airport hushed,
al of us trying to slip into that middle-aged
woman’s body,
her plaid Bermuda shorts, sleeveless blouse,
light gold hoop earrings, tilting our heads up.

The reader is invited to identify with the woman
engaged in a long kiss—“tilting our heads up.” Poem
by poem, the reader is being won over by the book.

Next in this entertaining section, “Bone of My
Bone and Flesh of My Flesh” deals wittily with the
conundrum of what to call a same-sex partner when at
the dry cleaner’s: “You don’t want to say, ”

And if you are riding on a bicycle
or a skateboard, in a wheelchair, each
revolution
a prayer as the earth revolves:
less harm, less harm, less harm

Bass offers poetry that we need to hear now,
poetry that renders a complex but accessible portrait
of what it is to be human. Her poetry consoles and
enhances, and just. It is a well-made prayer for peace
in the guise of art.

Marilyn Kallet is the author of Circe, After Hours,
poetry from BkMk Press, and Last Love Poems of
Paul Eluard, translations, Black Widow Press. With
Kathryn Stripling Byer, she has edited The Move-
able Nest: A Mother/Daughter Companion, Helicon
Nine Editions.

The Human Line
ELLEN BASS

Copper Canyon Press
http://www.coppercanyonpress.org
92 pages; paper, $15.00

Ellen Bass conveys life-oriented tenderness as part
of her own first name draw us in:

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