



CRITICISM

VOLUME

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Ted Berrigan

1934-1983

(Full name Edmund Joseph Michael Berrigan, Jr.)
American poet, playwright, novelist, and critic.

INTRODUCTION

Berrigan was an experimental poet whose influences include the writers of the Beat Generation as well as the artists of the American Expressionist movement. He is often associated with the New York School of Poetry, and is known for overturning formal conventions and rearranging the lines of earlier poems, both his own and those of other poets.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The eldest of three children, Berrigan was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on November 15, 1934, into a working class Roman Catholic family. His parents were Margaret Dugan and Edmund Berrigan, an engineer. Berrigan attended the local high school and then spent a year at Providence College, but did poorly and left in 1954 to enlist in the army. He served in a non-combat position in Korea for sixteen months and was then stationed in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When his three-year service commitment ended, Berrigan enrolled at the University of Tulsa on the G.I. Bill, earning a B.A. in 1959 and an M.A. three years later. In 1960 Berrigan, unhappy with what he considered the elitist literary community in Tulsa, moved to New York; two years later he married Sandra Alper, with whom he had two children, David and Kate. Separated from his first wife, he began seeing poet Alice Notley whom he married in 1971; the couple had two sons, Anselm and Edmund. Berrigan lived on the Lower East Side in New York where he was active in the local poetry community and worked at a variety of odd jobs, among them writing papers for undergraduates at Columbia University. He served as editor of "C," a Greenwich Village mimeographed magazine that was devoted to the work of neighborhood artists and writers, and in 1966-67 taught poetry at the St. Mark's Art Project. He served as visiting professor at the University of Iowa in 1968-69 and at Essex University in 1973-74; he also taught at a number of other colleges and universities including Yale, the University of Michigan, and the City College of New York. Berrigan's amphetamine use and poor diet, consisting mostly of Pepsi, Twinkies, and hamburg-

ers, contributed to his overall ill health during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1975 he contracted hepatitis and refused treatment for his condition. His health continued to deteriorate over the years, and he died on July 4, 1983, at the age of forty-eight. He was buried in the military cemetery in Riverhead, Long Island.

MAJOR WORKS

Berrigan's first publication was *A Lily for My Love: 13 Poems*, which appeared in 1959. His first collection to attract critical attention was *The Sonnets*, published by "C" Press in 1964 and then reprinted by Grove Press two years later. The volume earned Berrigan the Poetry Foundation Award in 1964. The sixty-six poems in the collection are primarily comprised of lines from other sonnets, his own and those of other poets from Shakespeare to Frank O'Hara. It was described by Berrigan as "an homage to myself." His next work, a collaboration with poet Ron Padgett and artist Joe Brainard, was titled *Bean Spasms* (1967) and contains numerous allusions to various literary and mythological sources.

Much of Berrigan's work was privately published by "C" Press and other small presses. His poetry volumes throughout the late sixties and seventies include *Many Happy Returns* (1969), *In the Early Morning Rain* (1970), *Red Wagon: Poems* (1976)—which contains some of his best work according to a number of critics—and *Nothing for You* (1977). In 1980 Berrigan published *So Going Around Cities: New and Selected Poems, 1958-1979*. His last book of poems was *A Certain Slant of Sunlight*, written in 1982, but unpublished until 1988. The work consisted of short poems originally written on blank postcards, which obviously limited the length of each poem. They range from one or two line poems to the longest, at thirty-one lines, and most "tend to be composed of units of information . . . or bits of language suggestive of emotional states, happenstance, philosophy, reflectiveness," according to reviewer Alice Notley. In 1994 Aram Saroyan edited and published *Selected Poems* and in 2005, Notley, along with her two sons by Berrigan, produced *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, a well-received assemblage that includes numerous poems never before published as well as a number of early poems that had been out of print for many years.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Berrigan's poetry from the 1960s, particularly the award-winning *Sonnets*, received mixed reviews. Tony Lopez (see Further Reading) describes the work as an "inventive appropriation of the sonnet sequence" and a "textual collage-recycling of various found materials." Lopez compares Berrigan's poetry to the combinations of high art and pop culture being produced by artists such as Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg. Eric Murphy Selinger calls Berrigan's sonnets "a cut-and-paste collage of new material, earlier work, translations from Rilke, Michaux, and Rimbaud, and lines clipped from Ashbery, O'Hara, and Shakespeare." Other critics, however, were not as kind and considered much of his early work jumbled and overly sentimental. Sue Russell complains that Berrigan's sonnets are characterized by "sonorous repetitions, oddball allusions, and elegiac overtones." Jordan Davis calls Berrigan's process in producing the sonnets "plagiarism-as-homage" and sees the work "as a courtly exercise in personal canon formation." According to Davis, "Berrigan was a nimble thief who found new uses for the lines and processes he stole."

By the time *Selected Poems* appeared in 1994, Berrigan's reputation had faded considerably. Based on her reading of the volume, Russell believes Berrigan's legacy is that of "a poet who could not legitimately be called great but who seldom failed to be interesting, both in his work and life." She is, however, put off by his inclusion of various famous males in his poetry, but notes that "women are either absent or represented as bed partners and dinner-makers." Libbie Rifkin has studied Berrigan's career and concludes that even at its height, Berrigan was a "decidedly minor" poet, although she concedes that "among the more consecrated avant-garde poets of his generation, Berrigan made an early and lasting impression." Among his admirers was his friend Mark Hillringhouse, who explains that Berrigan's "method of constructing a poem was to write down personal memories, take lines from newspapers, quote what other people said in conversation, or to tear apart other poets' poems he admired, to turn the lines around and insert his in between theirs then erase them, leaving his own lines intact." Despite this unconventional method of composition, Berrigan's poems are "very deliberate," according to Notley, his wife and editor. "They have a graven quality as if they were drawn on the page, word by word," she contends; she further praises the "remarkable . . . range of tones of voice" in her late husband's poetry. John Palattella, in his review of *The Collected Poems* reports that Berrigan was able to stay true to his working class background while navigating the sophisticated Manhattan poetry scene headlined by a number of prominent Harvard graduates and praises the poet for "balancing cockiness and composure, grit and grace." William Doeski contends

that Berrigan's later work is characterized by fragmentation to the point that at least one poem "simply collects quotations." He finds the late poems "more restless and chameleon-like" than the earlier material, but praises the publication of the 2005 volume of collected works so that "Berrigan can now receive the full reading this imperfect but serious artist deserves."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

A Lily for My Love: 13 Poems 1959
The Sonnets 1964
Bean Spasms [with Ron Padgett and Joe Brainard] (poetry and art) 1967
Many Happy Returns 1969
In the Early Morning Rain 1970
The Drunken Boat 1974
A Feeling for Leaving 1975
Red Wagon: Poems 1976
Nothing for You 1977
So Going Around Cities: New and Selected Poems, 1958-1979 1980
In a Blue River 1981
The Morning Line 1982
A Certain Slant of Sunlight 1988
Selected Poems [edited by Aram Saroyan] 1994
The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan [edited by Alice Notley with Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan] 2005

Other Major Works

Galileo: Or Finksville (play) 1959
Seventeen [with Ron Padgett] (plays) 1965
Clear the Range (novel) 1977
On the Level Everyday: Selected Talks on Poetry and the Art of Living [edited by Joel Lewis] (criticism) 1997

CRITICISM

Eric Murphy Selinger (essay date winter 1995)

SOURCE: Selinger, Eric Murphy. "That Awkward Grace." *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 21, nos. 1 & 2 (winter 1995): 298-324.

[In the following excerpt, Selinger reviews the poetry from the 1994 collection *Selected Poems*, which covers Berrigan's work from *The Sonnets* through *So Going Around Cities*.]

Halfway through Alice Notley's new *Selected Poems*—both in length and in emotional trajectory—lies a wry domestic sequence, "Waltzing Matilda." Its protagonist has her hands full. Her writing isn't going well, she complains engagingly, since "the words aren't jostling each other glitteringly in a certain way & they all have referents I think if that is a trouble." Her little boy, meanwhile, has a fever. Whenever her poem gets into a down and dirty Ovidian groove, he throws up, or begs to be tucked back into bed. ("Real-life juxtapositions are the most tasteless," she sighs.) As for her husband, also a poet—well, he's yelled at her, but nothing that makes sense, which leaves her more puzzled than hurt. "He has always in the past been excessively careful with words," she writes to The Adviser. "We both read L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine." They make up, make love, go to poetry readings, wake up "hungover / & chagrined." "I see little difference between you & your husband," The Adviser shrugs in response. "You're both big and awkward sentimental truth-telling fuck-ups." As for all that referential writing? "Buy yourself a Fischer-Price Activity Center, some glue and scissors etc. & get on with it all."

"Waltzing Matilda" first caught my eye as a snapshot of the Berrigan-Notley household: a lucky, productive *ménage* that lasted from 1971 until Berrigan's death in 1983. I've come to suspect its cheerfully fractured self-portrait. (Both poets are more furtive than they appear.) But The Adviser's comments yield a helpful headnote to their work. On the one hand, Berrigan and Notley love to come across as "big and awkward sentimental truth-telling fuckups," affable, benign, endearing, blithe. So what if The Adviser goes on a word too long, bobbling his crisp, predictable "get on with it"? As in baseball, an error here and there keeps you awake. And yet, as they invite you to dote on their work not *despite* the occasional miscue, but *because* of it, they also insist you treat them as artists, "excessively careful with words." "Ted was ceaselessly interested in what you might call technique," Notley writes in her introduction to the new *Selected* Berrigan; he "probably talked about it more than any poet or academician in America." "Technically, she is impeccable, & / If She is clumsy in places, those are clumsy places," Berrigan returns the compliment. That stumble wasn't just a sign of life; it was a deliberate aesthetic gesture, a quick impasto swipe that calls your attention to the "jostle" of paint on the canvas—and, a moment later, to the hand that held the brush.

The risks of this approach are obvious. You don't have to read far into either *Selected* to find work that steps on your toes or nudges your elbow, calling you a killjoy if you don't grin back. Such poems can try your patience, whether for the jitter and clutter of their verbal surface or the baldness of their sentiment. (To get the pleasure of these poets you need a sweet tooth, and an

appetite. "I like to use a lot of words," says Berrigan; and Notley calls her muse "that blabbermouth.") At their best, though, the twinborn personae invoked in "Waltzing Matilda" team up in a comic and appealing *pas de deux*. The sentimental truth-teller saves the craftsman from pretension—the sort you'd find in (let's be wicked) L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine. The artist bails the fuckup out of bathos. You can wear your heart on your sleeve, they reassure each other, as long as you wear your art there, too. Leaning together for balance, they make their way from line to line, in the dance that Berrigan once called "that awkward grace."

If Berrigan and Notley simply kept asking "Can I do *this* in a poem?" their work would be entertaining, even to a formalist like me. Not a goal to be sniffed at. ("Can entertainment have ceased to be a value in poetry?" Notley wonders in her Introduction to Berrigan—a question worth asking, especially of "experimental" poets.) But as I acquired a taste for their work—Notley charmed and impressed me more quickly, I'll confess—I was struck by how that "Can I do *this*?" grows out of a more searching, savory root. "Can I do this in a poem?" Berrigan wonders: I, a "bumpkin with a master's degree," as he saw himself on his arrival in New York. "Can I do this," asks Notley: I, a woman determined to write in the "Mainstream American Tradition" of Williams and O'Hara while still "a slave, well mildly, to a baby." Although I will have less time than I'd like to speak of Notley's recent work—she's turned her back on playfulness, out for epic game—I want to trace the different ways each poet "gets on with it all." Cutting and pasting, Activity Centers writ large, they turn initial worry into awkwardly graceful art.

"To me," said Berrigan in 1970, "it's an incredible achievement that I could write a poem." Born into a working-class Irish Catholic family in Providence, Rhode Island, in the Depression, Berrigan grew up in a world he loved, but felt estranged from. "I never told anyone what I knew," he would recall in "**Cranston Near the City Line**," "Which was that it wasn't / for anyone else what it was for me." He kept those mixed feelings alive in the varied diction of his work, sometimes delicate, touched by hesitant detail—"one chipped glass Scottie; an eggshell teacup & saucer, tiny, / fragile, but with sturdy handle; a gazelle?"—sometimes brusque and selfconsciously masculine: "The piano was black. My eyes were brown. I had rosy / cheeks, every sonofabitch in the world said. I never saw them" ("**Cranston Near the City Line**"). In "**Last Poem**" he conjures two totemic objects from his earliest memory: "a glass slipper & a helpless blue rose." They peg him as, at heart, a Cinderella, forced to scrap and scrape to get along, waiting for escape and transformation. Hence, perhaps, the dream announced in "**Personal Poem #9**":

I think I was thinking
when I was ahead I'd be somewhere like Perry Street

erudite dazzling slim and badly-loved
 contemplating my new book of poetry
 to be printed in simple type on old brown paper
 feminine marvelous and tough

The poet's O'Hara-like ideal self, "erudite dazzling slim," contrasts with the more sentimental description of his ideal poem, "simple type on old brown paper / feminine marvelous and tough." The latter hits closer to home.

Berrigan attended Providence College briefly, did poorly, dropped out. He joined the army, served in Korea, then went back to school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In his genial short memoir of love and resistance, *Ted*, Ron Padgett recalls that Berrigan was "somewhat cowed" by the poets and artists he met in Tulsa. They were "scornful, elitist, atheistic, and angst-ridden": hardly the model or community for a man inclined to be exuberant, populist, enthusiastic, and religious in the gentle, sometimes mawkish way of another former altar-boy, Jack Kerouac. The "I" of Berrigan's later work gets "high on poems, or pills" primarily to regain his "simple awe that loveliness exists" ("Words for Love") and to affirm his status as a man "ordained to praise / In ordinary places" ("Heloise"). Poems by Frank O'Hara and the Beats gave him an alternative, more temperamentally appropriate model for what it meant to be an artist: not just "Strolling, sassy, dashing, brilliant!" ("Sandy's Sunday Best") but "completely interested" ("Frank O'Hara").

At the end of 1960 Berrigan left Tulsa for New York City "to become this wonderful poet, to become a poet," as he put it twenty years on. This mix of braggadocio ("to become this wonderful poet") and more reflective ambition ("to become a poet") suggests the hope and insecurity that spurs his work from those days—an emotional mix equally evident in the note he sent returning his Tulsa University M.A. diploma, "Dear Sirs: I am the master of no art." "How many times I heard Ted describe himself as a bumpkin, socially inept, unsophisticated," Padgett muses. If he was "cowed" by the coolness of Tulsa poets, he was still more "cowed" by the artists he met in New York, whose "dazzlingly witty conversation," writes Padgett, "made him feel cloddish. A combat boot among ballet slippers." To feel himself a poet, a *real* poet, he needed both to be confirmed by others and to achieve a relationship to art other than that vexed ideal of mastery. Consider "Hearts," an early sonnet sadly cut out of the Penguin *Selected*: "At last I'm a real poet," it begins, excitedly:

I've written a
 ballade a sonnet a poem in spontaneous
 prose and even a personal poem I can use
 punctuation or not and it doesn't even
 matter I'm obscure when I feel like it
 especially in my dream poems which I never even

call Dream Poem but from sheer cussedness title
 Match Game Etc. (for Dick Gallup) or something like
 that

For example, take this poem, I don't know how
 to end it, It needs six lines to make it a sonnet, I
 could just forget it and play hearts with Joe and
 Pat and Dick, but lately I'm always lethargic,
 and I don't even like hearts, or Pat, or Joe, or
 Dick or / and especially myself, & this is no help.

Like the singer of the sixties' Motown hit "Do You Love Me (Now that I can Dance)?" Berrigan's "I" shouts "Watch me now!" He wants us to cheer him as he does the Ballade, the Personal Poem, the Mashed Potato, the Twist, a little scared that we'll say "no" when he asks, *Do you like it like this?*

I don't mean naively to equate this speaker with the poet. In the Author's Note to *So Going Around Cities*, a New and Selected collection that Berrigan edited in 1980, he says that his ambition has been to create "a character named I." I believe him. But the systole and diastole of "Hearts" capture the extremes that Berrigan's work always pulses between: the love of poetic forms and genres and "tricks" for their own sake, as things to *do*, and the fears of solitude, ineptitude, and lethargy that all this *doing* aims to assuage. Berrigan's "Things to Do" poems enact this movement from lassitude to action, or the reverse. "Things to Do in Providence" thus starts out flat, words scattered glumly on the page: "Sit / watch TV / draw blanks / swallow / pepsi / meatballs." It kicks into high gear as the "character named I" decides to "give [himself] the needle," and four packed pages of conversation, musings, amusements, and finally peacefulness follow. "Things to Do in Anne's Room," by contrast, starts by strutting a Williams three-step across the page—"Walk right in / sit right down / baby, let your hair hang down"—only to dwindle to a fetal curl: "get into the bed / be alone / suffocate / don't die / / & it's that easy." Writing poems usually breaks the "character named I" of his sullen mood, especially when he can turn to the reader, the "you," for reassurance. This turn, straight out of *Calamus*, makes for some of Berrigan's most winning moments. At the end of "Many Happy Returns" he finds himself "about to be / born again thinking of you"; and in "Ann Arbor Song," a bantering, burlesqued, and somewhat corny poem listing things that will never happen again, he promises his reader that "you'll find me right here, when you come through, again." Such confessions of a faith in being read certify what's come before as written by a "real poet." The poem's value, and more important, the *poet's*, are both guaranteed by the exchange.

The poems that earned Berrigan the reading he longed for, both from older New American Poets and from himself, were *The Sonnets*. Written in a flurry, some-

times several a day, these poems are a cut-and-paste collage of new material, earlier work, translations from Rilke, Michaux, and Rimbaud, and lines clipped from Ashbery, O'Hara, and Shakespeare. At times they exhibit Berrigan's earlier anxieties, as at the end of **Sonnet LXXV**, where the "character named I" is a boy playing a losing game of pin-the-tail-on-the-modern: "looking for today with tail-pin. I / never place it right, never win." This time, however, he can say that "It / doesn't matter," since "The cooling wind keeps blowing and my poems are coming." That the sonnets kept coming, despite interruptions, freed the poet of his worry over being the master of an art. "I wasn't trying to be the master of that form," Berrigan later recalled, "I was just trying to write my works and the form made itself available to me, in fact it forced itself upon me."

Berrigan credited his interest in collage not only to the usual avant-garde suspects (Cage, Burroughs), but also to T. S. Eliot, whose *Waste Land* he "fell in love" with when he returned to school. When the "he" of *The Sonnets* does the police in different voices, of course, the clash between grand allusion and garrulous demotic does not signal a cultural decline. It's meant, instead, to exorcise the ghosts of aesthetic pretension, as when **Sonnet IV** begins by quoting Rilke ("Lord, it is time. Summer was very great") only to turn simply silly: "All sweetly spoke to her of me / about your feet, so delicate, and yet double E!!" I'm no Tulsa intellectual snob, such lines proclaim—but I'm no Tulsa bumpkin, either. The most telling allusion comes in the final sonnet. Now that the "aery charm" of making *The Sonnets* is finished, he writes, "I'll break / My staff bury it certain fathoms in the earth / And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I'll drown my book. / It is 5:15 a.m. Dear Chris, hello." Unlike the end of "**Hearts**," where the private game of art proved an inadequate substitute for the communal game of hearts, the "**Final Sonnet**" mounts an allusive, masterful performance by disowning mastery and turning to the presumably smaller accomplishments of the social. Since even that final gesture is accomplished in words familiar from earlier sonnets, the last line seems as much a *da capo* as a coda. It foreshadows Berrigan's later interest in occasional poems, poems on postcards, "personal poems" in the Frank O'Hara style: poems as convivial as they are "constructivist." As soon as it was published in 1964, Berrigan mailed copies of *The Sonnets* to poets he admired: Dear Creeley, hello; Dear Aiken, hello. (Padgett quotes Aiken's urbane response: "Thanks for sending me your book, which is fun, I think, but not quite my cup of Mescal.")

Perhaps to end with that genial "Dear Chris, hello," the Penguin *Selected* saves its selection of *The Sonnets* for last. This is, I think, a mistake. The poet rightly saw these poems as a turning point in his career: his "first and last adolescent work," he agrees when Clark

Coolidge suggests the phrase, but also a substantial achievement, after which he felt "a tremendous desire to be slight." Read in chronological order, many of the poems that follow seem an effort to keep in motion, to see what can be done now that one's "book," as if dictated by magic, has been written and drowned. Can I bring the torque and unpredictability native to the collage of *The Sonnets*, Berrigan asks, into a longer and lighter, not to say "slighter," work? Can I pack the speed and looseness of the longer "field" poems into a single bulky, even balky stanza? Can I build a poem worth rereading out of chewy mouth-music and layered non-sequiturs ("**An Orange Clock**"), or do I need to air it out with rhymes and a cheery address to a dedicatee ("**So Going Around Cities**")?

"If you're the kind of person who thinks that everything a poet writes should be perfect," Padgett warns, "then yes, Ted wrote too much. But that was his job, to write. And even the lesser works always have some purpose; he liked to experiment, try out new moves, new tones, and new shifts of tone." Is it our "job" to read such works? Should they be included in a *Selected*? Padgett's answer would probably be yes. To sift them out is to belie the poet's faith that writing was, in Padgett's words, "something you did when you read the sports page or ate a donut. It was something you did when you sat at your desk and thought about the gods. It was something you did with scissors and Elmer's glue." It is also to mask the formal achievement of the poems where the new moves and tones suddenly seem instinctive, effortless. By the time you've read fifty-some pages into the *Selected Poems*, for example, you've heard Berrigan experiment with the rhyming and clashing "hits between words" that build up a poem's "surface," watched him stretch out on the page in "**Bean Spasms**" and "**Tambourine Life**," and noted his increasing facility with poems that make themselves up as they go along, enacting the discoveries and shifting moods (often the growing relief) of their composition. Some of these poems, like "**Things to Do in Anne's Room**," are already accomplished work; others, like "**February Air**," seem successful labtests, their results yet to be tested on more demanding emotional terrain. Then you reach "**Peace**," a delicate poem elbowed out of anthologies by the flash and glitter of *The Sonnets*. It starts with the question behind so much of Berrigan's work: *What to do?*

What to do
 when the days' heavy heart
 having risen, late
 in the already darkening East
 & prepared at any moment, to sink
 into the West
 surprises suddenly,
 & settles, for a time,
 at a lovely place
 where mellow light spreads

evenly
from face to face?

When Berrigan chats with Tom Clark about “that awkward grace,” this is the poem they have before them. He has his eyes on vowels at first: open *ehs*, various *as*, “settling” eventually into a self-conscious, soothing rhyme. Next he plays with pace, rushing and slowing his lines, tossing in an awkwardly inverted simile, threading his beads first on one set of rhymes, then another, then a third:

The days' usual aggressive
contrary beat
now softly dropped
into a regular pace
the head riding gently its personal place
where pistons feel like legs
on feelings met like lace.
Why,
take a walk, then,
across this town. It's a pleasure
to meet one certain person you've been counting on
to take your measure
who will smile, & love you, sweetly, at your leisure.
And if
she turns your head around
like any other man,
go home
and make yourself a sandwich
of toasted bread, & ham
with butter,
lots of it
& have a diet cola
& sit down
& write this,
because you can.

One of Berrigan's least strenuous and most accomplished poems, "**Peace**" makes a small, believable claim about the pleasures of making and proves it, expertly. The poem makes no bid for broader mastery; indeed, the little stumbles of "the head riding gently its personal place" (as opposed to its impersonal one?) and "she turns your head around / like any other man" (*she's* like any other man? your head is?) seem designed to lower expectations, keep it all casual. They set up, by contrast, the last lines' quiet faith.

My favorite poems by Berrigan share with **"Peace"** a counterpoint of sentiment and surface. Aram Saroyan seems to agree; or, at least, he finds such poems the best way into Berrigan's work. He opens the Penguin *Selected* with **"Words for Love,"** the poem where Berrigan declares himself "in love with poetry." Love means you tally lists of words and names, and let the "minute detail" that "fills [you] up" fill up your poems, even if the clock is a little off. (Somehow it's 2 o'clock in Houston when it's 12:10 in New York.) Love commands that you scuff the surface of your work through twists of diction, cantilevered rhymes, and spotlight repeti-

tions of sound. “I go my / myriad ways blundering,” Berrigan declares, breaking the line so that you say, “my, my, indeed you do.” Saroyan follows this with “**Personal Poem #9**,” the “feminine marvelous and tough” poem I quoted a few pages ago, and then the gentle New York pastoral “**For You**,” dedicated to James Schuyler—a poem that wages this tug of war between formal device and emotional appeal to good effect:

New York's lovely weather hurts my forehead
here where clean snow is sitting, wetly
round my ears, as hand-in-glove and
head-to-head with Joe, I go reeling
up First Avenue to Klein's. Christmas
is sexy there. We feel soft sweaters
and plump ruffled skirts we'd like to try.
It was gloomy being broke today, and baffled
in love: Love, why do you always take my heart
away?

But then the soft snow came sweetly falling down
and head in the clouds, feet soaked in mush
I rushed hatless into the white and shining air
glad to find release in heaven's care.

Some readers will find more “mush” here than they’d like, especially in the last five lines. I find the pun of “hand-in-glove,” the play between “Klein’s” and Christmas, the double-sense of “plump” as adjective and verb, and the mannered, nagging, burlesqued repetitions of sound throughout this almost-sonnet piquant enough to balance the sweetness. And, to be honest, I prefer Berrigan at his more “feminine,” trying on the skirt of sentiment, to the giddier, self-interrupting poet who writes so much of *The Sonnets*, “Bean Spasms,” and “Tambourine Life.”

In Berrigan's later work, the question is no longer "what to do" but "how long do I have to do it?" Several of his strongest, most memorable poems were written in his last six years—in *So Going Around Cities*, the earlier New and Selected, you find them in the section entitled "Not Dying." It's odd to read these poems in the Penguin *Selected*, with nearly a third of the book still safely tucked under your right thumb, but it's exhilarating to see the poet's gift for brag, there from his earliest poems, suddenly take root and blossom. "I am 43," he writes in "**Red Shift**": "When will I die? I will never die. I will live / To be 110 & I will never go away, & you will never escape from me" since "I'm only pronouns, & I am all of them, & I didn't ask for this / You did." Such lines give a newly self-questioning spin to the poet's turns to "you" for reassurance; they make me wish that "**Living with Chris**" had been included, with its earlier tragicomic final question: "For god's sake, is there anyone out there listening?") The Monday morning editor in me wants to slip "**Red Shift**" into a closing cadence, and to close the book with Berrigan's "**Last Poem.**"

Measured and assured, “**Last Poem**” glances back to memories of the “glass slipper & helpless blue rose,” mulls over how the poet “verbalized [himself] a place / in Society. 101 St. Mark’s Place, apt. 12A, NYC 10009.” It also includes enough awkwardness to shake you out of any easy elegiac mood. (I can come up with four good reasons why the line “I once had the honor of meeting Beckett & I dug him” isn’t a pratfall, starting with the reference, a line before it, to “several new vocabularies,” but I’m not sure I believe them.) Unlike the “**Final Sonnet**,” which calls on Shakespeare to stage its farewell, “**Last Poem**” seems an authentically Prosperian moment: a poem where “what strength I have’s my own.” That Berrigan envisions himself dying while writing, finding his words, sums up his faith in poetic *doing*; that he claims to have died while “next to you in bed” suggests how far he’s come from the social and artistic anxieties of “**Hearts**.” Of the poems that follow in the *Selected*, at least until you get to *The Sonnets*, one is tender, one is funny, and three are slight, stabs at new moves and new tones. None makes as fitting an ending as this:

The pills kept me going, until now. Love, & work,
Were my great happinesses, that other people die the
source
Of my great, terrible, & inarticulate one grief. In my
time
I grew tall & huge of frame, obviously possessed
Of a disconnected head, I had a perfect heart. The end
Came quickly & completely without pain, one quiet
night as I
Was sitting, writing, next to you in bed, words chosen
randomly
From a tired brain, it, like them, suitable, & fitting.
Let none regret my end who called me friend.

Sue Russell (essay date spring 1995)

SOURCE: Russell, Sue. “Among Lovers, Among Friends.” *Kenyon Review* 17, no. 2 (spring 1995): 147-53.

[In the following review of Berrigan’s *Selected Poems*, introduced by the poet’s second wife Alice Notley, Russell contends that Berrigan’s work is interesting, but not necessarily as great as Notley believed it to be. Russell was especially disappointed in *The Sonnets*, which Notley claimed was “obviously a masterpiece.”]

Who is Ted Berrigan, anyway? More than one poetry-literate friend of mine, on hearing that I was assigned to review Berrigan’s *Selected Poems*, said, “Yeah, one of the Berrigan brothers *did* write poetry,” to which I responded more than once, “No, that’s Daniel. *This* Berrigan is not related.”

My only prior knowledge of *this* Berrigan came from the recent biography of Frank O’Hara by Brad Gooch, in which Berrigan appears as an occasional hanger-on

and index item, a peripheral player in the New York scene of the sixties. As Gooch recounts, “Ted Berrigan, a young poet from Tulsa, Oklahoma, who sent his first fan letter in the fall of 1961, used to stand on Avenue A staring up patiently at O’Hara’s apartment before they ever met” (399).

This new collection, with its cover blurbs by Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley and introduction by Berrigan’s second wife, the poet Alice Notley, casts him in a more central role. After reading the “selected poems,” I was left with an impression of a poet who could not legitimately be called great but who seldom failed to be interesting, both in his work and life. As the editor of the early “zine” *C*, mimeographed on legal-sized paper in a Greenwich Village bookstore, he published the work of his fellow New York poets, along with what Notley refers to as “glorious black and white covers” by the artist, Joe Brainard. Notley remarks as well on Berrigan’s sense of irony about being a part of an acclaimed school of poets: “Ted used to tell people that he was in charge of the New York School and that anyone could join it if they paid him five dollars—at some point ten for inflation; no one ever joined this way” (x).

I read Notley’s introduction with great interest once before I read the poems and then several times after. Her remarks, subjective as they might be, provided a touchstone against which I could test my own response. For instance, Notley quotes Berrigan as saying, “I like my poems to have a surface the way a painting does,” and the poems do have surface, but at times surface seems to be all they have. It is hard to get inside them, to get beyond the veneer of odd connections, names, and lifted quotes. Often it seems that Berrigan is aiming for the spontaneity of O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poems, but forced spontaneity is a contradiction in terms.

Overall, however, O’Hara’s continued importance for Berrigan is not necessarily a sign of weakness, nor should it be taken lightly. O’Hara’s influence on Berrigan and others had as much to do with the crystallization of a distinctly urban voice as with the talent of a particular man. Even poets not likely to be grouped with the New York School invoke this voice as a means to establish an openness of diction that might not otherwise be accessible within their range.

O’Hara’s influence can also be seen in Berrigan’s dedication to poetry as a vocation, although Berrigan lived most of his writerly life without a day job like that of O’Hara with the Museum of Modern Art. He earned a small income as an itinerant poet, giving readings and leading workshops at a far range of places, including Yale, the University of Essex in England, and Naropa Institute. According to Notley, Berrigan liked to

say that being a poet was a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. To his way of thinking, a poet's sole occupation should be poetry.

It would seem that a fair portion of his nonwriting time was spent collecting potential material through day-to-day interactions with friends and random acquaintances. Constant references to second generation New York poets like Ron Padgett and Dick Gallup, along with Joe Brainard, suffuse the poems with a spirit of generous collaboration and affection. On the other hand, the insistent use of such references and inside jokes can make the reader feel like an intruder on an unfamiliar scene.

Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to tell from the words on the page when Berrigan is making fun of poetic affectation and when he is simply being affected. I often tried to imagine the poems being read, or more likely *performed*, to get a sense of their impact. Nonetheless, there is an inescapable element of playfulness in Berrigan's writing that can be infectious. As Notley mentions, "Ted worked on . . . being friendly" in his poems, and that friendliness comes through in much of his work, not only through the overlay of allusions but also in their generally social tone. Berrigan appears to have been on friendly terms with "great literature" as well. He quotes Donne and Shakespeare with much the same casual attitude as he does his drinking buddies, which does not mean they are any the less exalted.

Paradoxically, *The Sonnets*, which Notley deems "obviously a masterpiece," are among my least favorite poems in the volume. With their sonorous repetitions, oddball allusions (Ford Madox Ford rubs shoulders with Benedict Arnold), and elegiac overtones, these small poems seem to be aiming for a cumulative effect similar to that of Berryman's *Dream Songs*, but they collapse under the weight of the exercise. What's missing here is a conversational thread to pull the pieces together. The lack of a characterizable voice makes the poems seem oddly inert.

More attractive to me is a poem like "Things to Do in Providence," about a visit to Berrigan's family home, which takes the familiar convention of the list poem and bounces it around the page to great effect:

Crash
Take Valium Sleep

Dream &

forget it.

*

Wake up new & strange

displaced,

at home.

Read The Providence Evening Bulletin

No one you knew

got married
had children
got divorced
died

got born

tho many familiar names flicker &
disappear.

(62)

Less attractive, though true to its time, is the tendency toward masculine posturing evidenced within the poems. A lively parade of historically familiar male names (Apollinaire, Tzara, Rimbaud, Nijinsky, Juan Gris . . .) play cameo roles, along with notable friends of the period, but women are either absent or represented as bed partners and dinner-makers. It is not surprising that Notley refers to her husband's characterization of a "heroic age" which occurred before their marriage. She paraphrases Berrigan's sentiment: ". . . surely the giants were gone, and by his definition I wasn't one" (x). It did not escape Berrigan that a large number of his cultural heroes were homosexual. In fact, he displayed an odd tendency to make a point of his own heterosexuality, as if the social mores had reversed themselves. One example of this swaggering gesture occurs in "Dinner at George & Katie Schneeman's," where "heterosexual intercourse" adds to the atmosphere of general debauchery:

She was pretty swacked by the time she
Put the spaghetti & meatballs into the orgy pasta
bowl—There was mixed salt & pepper in the
"Tittie-tweak" pasta bowl—We drank some dago red
from glazed girly demi-tasse cups—after
which we engaged in heterosexual intercourse . . .

(100)

Berrigan died in 1983 of liver disease at the age of forty-eight. Sometime earlier, he provided his own epitaph in "Last Poem":

. . . Love & work
Were my great happinesses, that other people die the
source
Of my great, terrible & inarticulate one grief. In my
time
I grew tall & huge of frame, obviously possessed
Of a disconnected head, I had a perfect heart. The end
Came quickly & completely without pain, one quiet
night as I
Was sitting, writing, next to you in bed, words chosen
randomly

From a tired brain, it, like them, suitable & fitting.
Let none regret my end who call me friend.

(95)

But the body of Berrigan's work is a reminder that this "great and terrible" grief was, in fact, articulate, in poem after poem, made perhaps less "terrible" through the machinations of his "perfect heart."

Libbie Rifkin (essay date winter 1997)

SOURCE: Rifkin, Libbie. "'Worrying about Making It': Ted Berrigan's Social Poetics." *Contemporary Literature* 38, no. 4 (winter 1997): 640-72.

[In the following essay, Rifkin discusses Berrigan's efforts at promoting, legitimating, and mythologizing his own poetic career in his writings, with particular attention to *The Sonnets* and his work as editor of "C" magazine.]

From its position of relative obscurity in the hazy canon of 1960s experimental poetry, Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets* mounts an assault on its scholarly future:

"The academy
of the future
is opening its doors"

—John Ashbery

The academy of the future is opening its doors
my dream a crumpled horn
Under the blue sky the big earth is floating into "The Poems."
"A fruitful vista, this, our South," laughs Andrew to his Pa.
But his rough woe slithers o'er the land.
Ford Madox Ford is not a dream. The farm
was the family farm. On the real farm
I understood "The Poems."

Red-faced and romping in the wind, I, too,
am reading the technical journals. The only travelled
sea
that I still dream of
is a cold black pond, where once
on a fragrant evening fraught with sadness
I launched a boat frail as a butterfly.

(*The Sonnets* 62)

Sonnet LXXIV appeals simultaneously to two distinct audiences: to the disinterested reader, this poem offers itself as a "ready-made," ideal for consumption within the terms of postmodernism, but undisciplined and probably not very good. Within the first few lines one can say something about citation, repetition, and pastiche, quite efficiently characterize the volume's approach to both literary history and poetic form, and move on. From the avant-garde insider, however, the poem

demands a closer reading. If one knows Berrigan's biography, or knew Berrigan, the apparently nonsensical splicings are narratable in personal terms; tracking down the poem's many references is a worthwhile exercise in nostalgia, or at least sociology.¹ But one needn't have been there to get the jokes. The poem produces its own insiders by adhering to the first principle of comedy, repetition-with-a-difference. Reciting the epigraph, the first line takes it literally, inflecting the Ashberian middle voice with an obviously inappropriate declamatory tone. Lines 6-8 function similarly: "The farm / was the family farm. On the real farm / I understood 'The Poems'" begins with a bad imitation of confessionalism and then retrospectively takes itself seriously; the words remain stolidly the same while the poem works through a series of shifts in tonal context. Sonnet LXXIV becomes a kind of user's guide to literary parody.

Hailing a variety of professionally invested readerships, Berrigan's work makes visible the contours of the literary field in its contemporary moment and, presciently, in ours. Reading it is an experience in reflexivity, as revealing of the critic as it is of the poet. But does cultural savvy translate into cultural value? Does positing an audience actually produce one? Can a poet do as Frank O'Hara says in "Personism: A Manifesto" and make it on "nerve" (498) alone?

* * *

"I came to New York to become this wonderful poet, . . . and I was to be very serious. Not to become but to be. . . . That only took about a year and a half, then I wrote this major work and there I was" (Pritikin 20). In the scores of interviews and talks he gave between the 1967 publication of his debut book, *The Sonnets*, and his death in 1983, Ted Berrigan recounts the beginnings of his poetic career in this way; he compresses the bildungsroman's developmental narrative until it yields the immediacy of the "star-is-born" story. Berrigan's working-class high artist is a pop persona—part ingenue, part impresario. This essay traces this model of the poetic career through *The Sonnets* and Berrigan's little magazine "C" and into the avant-garde art worlds where he sought to be both an innovator and an institutional force—a producer not only of poetic collages but of poetic coteries. The double positioning readable in these two works emblemizes the predicament of a postwar avant-garde ambitiously laying the institutional groundwork for its own posterity. Like many of the poets in his cohort, Berrigan's formal experiments are best understood through their social aims and effects. In what follows, I analyze the sonnet sequence and the little magazine as, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, "position-takings" on the cultural field. But I depart from Bourdieu in focusing my analysis on the way cultural value is created and contested by an individual actor—a largely unknown