



Poetry, Linguistics, and Sex with Dinosaurs

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**SEVEN PAGES MISSING, VOLUME TWO:
PREVIOUSLY UNCOLLECTED TEXTS,
1968–2000**

Steve McCaffery

Coach House Books
<http://www.chbooks.com>
384 pages; paper, \$19.95

The role of a library in a tale of research is congruent to the role a femme fatale plays in a Raymond Chandler novel. It is the vehicle through which we will identify with the hero-professor/detective. It is no mistake that the library is the topic that introduces Walter Benjamin's collection, *Illuminations*, for it is the one thing that will tell us the most about the man. I think also of the libraries of Borges or Eco's *In the Name of the Rose*. I'd even admit to reading certain research-oriented authors (like Sontag) exclusively for their libraries.

In the story of scholarship, the erotic, as Barthes so sensuously lingers over it in *The Pleasure of the Text*, is research slowly revealing—in a froth, flashing between the hemlines of common knowledge—a little truth, *un petit verité*, to put a spin on the time-honored phrase. Here, I am thinking of writers like W.G. Sebald, Jonathan Raban, and, on the avant-gardist side of the coin, Steve McCaffery. This is the sort of enjoyment that I get from reading through McCaffery's paper from the 80s, "The Perseus Project: Paleogorgonization and the Sexual Life of Fossils," collected in his new book, *Seven Pages Missing, Volume Two: Uncollected Texts, 1968–2000*. It is proposed by McCaffery (a 'pataphysicist, poet, and professor at York University, Toronto) that there be a new branch of study, one which explores seemingly disparate subjects—fossils and linguistics—into a branch called paleosexuality.

"The Perseus Project" is a history of the field thus far, as well as a proposed trajectory for the future, and it begins with the author's discovery—while "compiling a definitive descriptive catalogue of European sado-erotic devices"—of one Samuel Gatty's library. We are treated to a delicious array of titles, for instance *The Complete Transactions of the Antiseptic Club* and *Corpus Linguisticus Mythologus Hellenicum*. The latter was written by a heretical monk named Benedetto Fentworth. As McCaffery describes it, "The book is a complex web of allegorical romance, scholastic rhetoric, Pythagorean numerology and hermeticism all interwoven around the central story of the myth of Medusa." The story of Medusa, you'll remember, is the story of the Gorgan whose hair is writhing snakes and whose gaze turns men into stone—and hence *fossils*. Here's Gatty on

the subject: "Fentworth has hit upon my own terrible discovery of the intimate connection between language, fossil, sex and death. These are truths too dangerous to be openly announced." No doubt. But if we are to take this conclusion humorously, we are also invited to sustain it seriously: "What this paper has proposed is not a truth," McCaffery lets on, but "neither is it a lie. Rather it has been the fictitious life of a single fact that poses as the factual life of a single fiction...."

To the uninitiated, this may read like silly satire or, even worse, conspiracy theory, but in fact this "Perseus Project" is a different breed altogether. It is a 'pataphysical essay. 'Pataphysics is an imaginary science, a pseudoscience in the literal sense, whose founder was the Frenchman Alfred Jarry (1873–1907). Jarry was a poet-philosopher whose most famous invention was his character, Ubu, a sort of equivalent to Nietzsche's Zarathustra. Christian Bök persuasively argues in his 2002 book, *'Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science*, that this imaginary science has been one of the fundamental ideas to shape the twentieth century. Bök traces this influence from the Italian Futurists, through the French Oulipians, and finally to the Canadian Jarryites—of which Steve McCaffery has been one of the primary members. 'Pataphysics, being somewhat an anti-metaphysics, allows for the search of ideas to be released from the drudgery of the scientific method. Instead, ideas are invited to expand into the vast terrain of linguistic slippages and poststructuralist method, to be enticed by pop-fetishes and deviant humor.



Detail from cover

However, it would be a mistake to claim that McCaffery is purely a 'pataphysicist. He is also a poet of ideas, "concrete" or visual poetry, and sound poetry. One of his important prose works (which mined Ron Silliman's role of parataxis in the "New Sentence") is his "The Black Debt," which Marjorie Perloff has highly praised and analyzed for its commentary on late-80s consumerism. He was an original member, with bpNichol, of the Four Horseman. He has collaborated with Michael Ondaatje. McCaffery is a nomadic figure whose work is amazing just by virtue of its breadth. Even if there are pieces I do not like, I am even more amazed that he is so good at so many things. For instance, in addition to the aforementioned 'pataphysical essay, he has written a wonderful homophonic translation of Gertrude Stein's famous line from "Sacred Emily," which he has called, "Latin Lines: for gertrude stein." It is short, and I find it obsessively recitable: "a rose"—it begins—"cicero's/ cicero's/ cicero's." This poem is not only brilliant for its simplicity and virtuosity, but it also exposes the bloody orator who, it seems, has been conspiring in Stein's rather rhetorical phrase all this time.

It is difficult to summarize the sheer breadth of style in *Seven Pages Missing, Volume Two*. Some of my favorite of his visual material are things called

"Typestracts." A typestract (the term was coined by a mostly unknown British concretist named Dom Sylvester Houedard) is composed on a typewriter but uses the letters as a physical unit. They are not something that carry semantic meaning in the language sense, but as a physical blob of ink, much more like painting than poetry. Letters condense and overlap into abstract patterns, some recognizable, such as "Typestract: 'Babel,'" which is of a building breaking apart, and others that are utterly nonrepresentational yet still beautiful, such as his masterpiece, "Carnival," a multi-paneled piece available in color at the Coach House Press Web site (<http://www.chbooks.com/online/carnival/index.html>).

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There are still many other projects collected in this volume that I have not yet been able to wrap my mind around and others that are failures—if you believe McCaffery's notes. bpNichol wrote, for instance, of McCaffery's long poem, "The Abstract Ruin," which is excerpted in this volume: "Well, Steve, maybe everybody has to write a failed epic." Still, there is enough "straight-ahead" poetry here to deserve the look-see. By "straight-ahead" I refer to poems that look like poems and explore their own semantic space as poems, in the more traditional sense. I think of moments in his poems, such as in "K as in Sleep:" "One is never sure here/ of the voice of passion/ the televised desire to stay." I also think of this portion of "The Abstract Ruin":

and poetry is sitting close to pretension
with stress on lapels
at which point
the readers have no overcoats
to generate this new conception of
the garment.

McCaffery's poems are full of intentional moments in which the mind of a writer is engaged in the dynamics of language and the dynamics of the consumer culture in which language plays a part.

The pieces in Volume Two have never before been collected in book form and so they are grouped under ad hoc banners such as the dubious "Miscellaneous Texts," where the homophonic Stein poem appears. But McCaffery is best when considered on his own intentions, whatever that may be at the time. His work is also an argument for the physical presence of poetry—on the page (visually) and in your ear (sonically). *Seven Pages Missing, Volume Two* is a library of sorts. Although it is one man's work, there is that kind of diversity in the material. It is a labyrinth of puzzling references, disparate forms, and nomadic urges. Although McCaffery is fiendish and funny, the impulse for his work and this collection seems a serious one to me. As such, it is also one to be picked up to be engaged with.

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