

THE UNION OF ART AND GRAVITY

Jay Rogoff. *The Art of Gravity*. Louisiana State University Press, 2011.

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Using dance as more than connective tissue, Jay Rogoff deftly marries art *and* gravity in his latest poetry collection *The Art of Gravity*. As the captivating title suggests, art takes the form of poetry; gravity, of dance. The two become intertwined, as in a marriage of souls.

Through these engaging, ephemeral, and often experimental poems, primarily approached from the stance of a grounded poet's voice, Rogoff explores the mythology of all parts of the dance world. This focus is not limiting, however. He's at once a ballet audience, a Lindy hopper, a tongue-tied fan, and a conversationalist who takes on Death. His beguiling explorations take us much further afield than our roots on the ground. We traverse towering figures of art, such as Degas or George Balanchine ("Mr. B.," as he was popularly known), and of mythology, such as Terpsichore or Orpheus. Throughout, there is the ever-present human, fallible man, awestruck in the face of goddess ballerinas.

Those ballerinas are refreshingly and realistically portrayed as kids, who "descend, when they issue through / the stage door, wearing baseball caps no team / has ever worn...." These "goddesses"... "lipsticking their ludicrous cigarettes" are the movable statues of George Balanchine's *Serenade*, one of New York City Ballet's signature works. This is only one of many historical and artful references Rogoff effortlessly includes, which permeate these pages. For example, those who know the following story will be pleased with the reference, and those who don't will find pleasure in the tale:

You must know the wonderful story
of Balanchine inventing *Serenade*,
how he made every section for the number
of dancers who showed up at class that day—
he was working with kids, after all, kids
knowing nothing of time, being as gods.

That marriage of "kids" and "gods" is made palpable in this poem called "Serenade," after Balanchine's famous work. *Serenade* was Balanchine's first work in the United States and was made on American dancers who lacked the discipline of classical training, as he knew it in Russia and Europe.

Rogoff, steeped in story, ties his far-reaching love of ballet to a ground-

ed poetics. He shows us “the luminosity of bodies at work,” yet keeps his voice one with the earth, accessible. Through poetry, he connects the ineffable with the possible in much the same way that through dance, the master himself, George Balanchine, connected the goddess to the woman: “that conferral / of divinity by a man who knew, / sometimes, that terrible seductiveness / of restraint....”

Rogoff, the author of three previous poetry collections and an astute dance critic, knows how to engage a thematic subject without trampling its possibilities. This is partly no doubt because he is so well versed in balletomania that his knowledge infuses each poem with enthusiasm, but it’s also because he’s a humble fan, willing to let these goddesses of the dance be women of the world. While he observes that dancers are superhuman, he also welcomes their fall to the earth, and this only increases their appeal—and the appeal of these poems.

As dancers fall in and out of the dance, entering and leaving the stage, dancing the chaconne, eating pizza and smoking cigarettes, these performers become creatures of the gods and the underworld. Rogoff rightly celebrates them as he also celebrates his own fascination with them in this opening invocation, which reads in part:

can't I impersonate
 a god in the privacy
 of my unconscious,
 dance
 under cover of tactful night
 in a dark house
 with no fear
 of a true mirror?

George Balanchine speaks to Rogoff: “*you / are god / of muses.*” It is true. From beyond, Mr. B. has surely given his benediction to this book.

This beautifully wrought collection shows passions inflamed and tamed, never suppressed. Rogoff is refreshingly honest about the male gaze, his male gaze, and the experience of watching a Balanchine ballerina onstage, but his reaction doesn’t have to be only a male phenomenon. I swoon, too, when I watch Maria Kowroski, who graces the cover of *The Art of Gravity*.

Rogoff captures that swoon as a fall to earth; the mortal constraints of audience members represented in “The House”: “Here in the fourth balcony hearts tremble / at such elevation.” Yet we mortals are necessary for the dance to take place as “Bodies assemble / to watch a ballerina in a hush / of music.” In another poem, we are reminded that “of all things bearing

scrutiny, love / bears least.”

Through Rogoff, we meet these creatures in after parties and use champagne to cover our stupefied awe. I don't think anyone else could capture a mere mortal's hellish tongue-tied yearning better than Rogoff does in this excerpt from “Making a Fool of Myself over Maria Kowroski”:

she's a dancer Balanchine would have loved, loved
bone and sinew, heir to the muse's mantel,
lunar-cruel and stupid with genius: music,
movement, and blank sex

knocking not the crotch but my chest and poor brain.
Charming? More like paralyzed: eyes gone flashbulbs,
air turned flame and raptured from lungs, my glib tongue
dumbing to granite.

Rogoff's wife comes to his rescue, reassuring Kowroski, “Don't be afraid, he / gets this way sometimes, but he's harmless, really.” We feel rescued, too, from our own dreams of touching those “nude pink, / ragged” toe shoes. Mortals always have the desire to hold not necessarily the gods themselves, but at least to touch something that the gods have used, something that will help them dance.

Five of the poems in *The Art of Gravity* appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, so many of our readers will know that Rogoff writes both in traditional and experimental forms. Bound or free, musical language is the ever-present score. Rogoff's musical language means that the collection reaches far beyond dance and stands on its own, as art in its own right aside from theme. I found myself reading these poems out loud, raptly listening to their music.

In Part Two called *Danses Macabres*, the unavoidable result of gravity—death—is fearlessly and feistily explored. At heart, Rogoff is a realist. As such, death is the ultimate gravitational force. Yet bowled over by beauty, he is always pragmatic. Who else could write, in a “Matter of Death,” that “Dante once wriggled blindly up Hell's sphincter, / bugging the final mineshaft, that center / of Gravity”? The cerebral element needed to create artifice is so skillfully handled behind-the-scenes that these poems are in no way ornamental. They are real. Viscerally felt.

Rogoff's *The Art of Gravity* helped me understand the terrible impossibility of the ballet aesthetic and the way all forms of dance encompass the weight and weightlessness of an artful life. Quite simply, I love the gravitational, poetic pull of Rogoff's work.