



COLD GEM

CAL BEDIENT

William Fuller, *Hallucination*
Flood Editions, \$14.95 (paper)

IN HIS GRADUATE STUDIES AT THE University of Virginia, William Fuller steeped himself in Renaissance Neoplatonism, which promoted the contemplation of a mystical goodness (“all things are directed from goodness to goodness,” as Marsilio Ficino put it) and preached inactivity: “Rejoice in the present” (also Ficino).

Fuller focused on Sir Thomas Browne and the poet Traherne and traced their thinking back to the fifteenth-century German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa. It was a case of a duck finding water. He has been writing out of and into Neoplatonism ever since, despite its unnerving implications for language—a situation he sums up in his poem “Poimandres”: “Artifice / the nerveless old snake / whack it / thou / empty sign.”

“Poimandres” is in *Hallucination*, Fuller’s sixth book. He also wrote a chapbook on steroids, and if one works at it one can locate several pam-

phlets (to adopt the British term) from small presses in the United States and England. Yet, despite Fuller’s impressive productivity, American readers outside the Chicago area may well find themselves asking: “Who is William Fuller?” *Hallucination* should be a wake-up call. After some uneven collections, Fuller—it’s as if he cracked open a can of spinach—has produced a book chock-full of stunning poems.

Fuller here mixes prose poems and poems in verse. The former—effectively a new passion for him—are uniformly remarkable. The best of the verse poems are his best ever, but overall they are less consistent than the prose: several long poems feature short, unpunctuated lines all-too rhythmically indifferent, jabbing, openly resistant to lingering in the clogging sugar fields of language. These poems are also problematically private. But—of the poems in sharply cut, short lines—“For the Lawful Heirs” is a marvel of swift, clipped traveling, coolly bold. And “Treasure Hidden Since” is even better, intently *de*-gathering itself, shedding itself line by line:

the state would
gather up
soft tissue
like wildflowers
at the plow

meditating
bell-like
they flew

the leaf
the flake
the filament

Effectively exculpating the state’s harrowing of its citizens’ flesh, the poem rejoices in a destruction that precedes rebirth. A Platonic meditation, resonating “bell-like” with the hidden *real* reality, prepares for a flight as if from “leaf” down to merest post-connective “filament,” a flight expressed in a suppression of grammar and a fluttery flurry of *F*s and *L*s. The poem is an instance of Neoplatonic *terribility*, to adopt a Joycean word.

“Agricultural Barometer,” which breaks free of the stutter-line, is another verse poem of the first order. Here, a strong rhythm takes command, sparking frictional *R*s:

like mercury rising in a stick
of
full body armor
roar in my face little airless sound

The compression and *menace* by *metaphor* astonish. A figure of poisonous, quick liquidity threatens the stiff body armor of matter, and a raging noise is called on to confound a head helmeted in signs. What weather, what crop?

The title probably alludes to Robert Fludd's early seventeenth-century invention of a water barometer and his praise, in *Philosophicall Key*, of wheat as the earthly counterpart to heavenly manna.

Fuller enters a babblingly confident corporate world where he concedes that something frightful is on the way.

In spite of his protective genius for figuration, Fuller sometimes risks seeming too confident in his pronouncements on what constitutes the ideal, or so a skeptic would conclude. But though he could be caricatured wearing a T-shirt stamped with the names Hermes, Fludd, and Nicholas of Cusa, like a law firm representing the beyond, he's not exactly an ideologue committed to utter immateriality. In "Jellon Grame," he even recklessly pleads, "spend your money please / it is full of mixture" (but caution: the dread Jellon is a ballad villain). I like the Platonizing schoolyard meanness of "I bend back / your finger / in perfect awareness / of the mystical winds / called flesh" and the austere *and* sensual ambivalence of "I see a cold gem ripening," but Fuller is most trustworthy when he notes, miserably, that he's still outside the mystically conceived ideal. Witness the brief poem "Trust Is the Name of the Father":

I found myself informing the court that *these* particular shoes were actually alive. That night voices puckered the wall. I reached inside my throat and felt for scars.

In "El Poeta," he even mocks himself while immersing his hand in the immutable present. Thus would he renounce capitalist accumulation

(semantically distanced by the Latin word for "heaping up," *acervation*):

To the east the lake floats above the grass. *Acervation*. Below the surface, the present me is preserved forever, while the former me is cut off. *Ya-ho-ho*. Dipping my hand in, I watch the cold fluid shrink my fingers which represent five lines composed with first stress off, second stress on, and .03 percent overlap.

True, the poem then leaps up into a Nicholas-like crunching of contraries: "Complete silence, then its opposite—for the moment, Teacher says, they are one, like a trumpet." But, circumspectly, the assurance of miraculous unity is left to "Teacher" (capitalized in the Hermetic style).


Naturally the longer prose poems are more grounded than any of the verse poems. Though fable-infested and fable-elevated, they grind away at things

as they are, even as they harbor spiritual terrorism. Fuller's brilliance in *Hal-lucination* is to move the prose poem into a babblingly confident corporate world where his virtuosic ventriloquism at length concedes that something frightful is on the way. A given poem may divulge sobering tongue-in-cheek confidences—e.g., "Reviewing accounts is work—generally tedious work—and if you are not familiar with it, difficult work, thankless work, lingering and vexatious work, aggravating, terrible"—when all along what the poet really wants to relate, and this truly is "terrible," is that "the power of alienation soaks you in flames." Near the end of a poem dedicated to Dally Kimoko, the Congolese guitarist, the speaker concludes, "Any estimated shortfall would still leave adequate amounts set aside to satisfy our need not to fluctuate." The poem then contradicts this prediction with an awful authority:


When win the future a kind of perpetual hum is heard, which grows

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louder as temperatures rise, strong hands will take command and clear light will darken us. At night a heavy body will be thrown against the floor and a tambourine will vibrate.

Such are Fuller's ironic assurances that a merely material economy will see us through. In essence, it is only a body to be dumped, its fitting funeral music a mere tambourine vibration, nothing so resonant as a guitar.

Fuller ignites Neoplatonism's pilot flame under the junk of "investors," "forfeits," "dirty price," "payment," "economy," "cost structure," "fund," "allocation," and so on. As the chief fiduciary officer of the Northern Trust Company in Chicago, he works somewhat to the side of big-gun banking, works caringly. Even so, his employment frequently exposes him to the "conference table" scene. He knows well the world of practical concerns that occlude the crucial anxiety, the one "stretching across the water like a train." The collection's title mocks the freedom call of capital: "Great floods ring the bell singing *thy time is come* to be unbound / while inside the bell a fight ensues."

Fuller's incessantly *thinking* prose poems make most other poems seem mentally sluggish. Nonetheless, their message is that "mind is tautological." Thought gets no further than words. Transcribing and channeling Fludd in "The (Tendentious) Spirit," Fuller writes of the heaven within earth as "Milky water, smooth and deep, coating every cell with standby assurances, a third of them in words." Words as "standby assurances"—Fuller's precision is unailing.

To appreciate these strong, beautiful poems, one need not endorse Neoplatonism just as one need not subscribe to its Hindu counterpart to admire *The Waste Land*. Books of the caliber of *Hallucination* come along rarely. Books that both puzzle and dazzle at first, then prove better and better with each re-reading. Books with a passion to get the spirit right.

Ladies and gentlemen, a masterpiece. **BR**



EACH PASSING THOUGHT

WILLIAM MONTGOMERY

Rae Armantrout, *Money Shot*
Wesleyan, \$22.95 (cloth)

RAE ARMANTROUT'S LAST BOOK, THE Pulitzer Prize-winning *Versed*, contained a number of poems that obliquely documented a personal crisis: the poet's encounter with life-threatening illness.

Its successor, by contrast, was written in the context of a collective crisis: the financial crash of 2008–2009. Its title, *Money Shot*, suggests a mingling of two kinds of thrill seeking, the reckless corporate gambling that has cost us all so dearly and the monetized desire that oils the wheels of the porn in-

dustry. Reading *Money Shot*, it is difficult, then, not to scrutinize the poems for symptoms and diagnoses of the economic and political mess we're in. Might we say that *Money Shot* does for the public crisis what *Versed* did for the private one?

Yes. But it would be wrong to infer that Armantrout has somehow in late career become a writer of Big Themes, possessed of a specifically poetic wisdom that can help us, as the jacket copy suggests, "understand the world in the wake of the Great Recession." This would both diminish her earlier work, which pays special attention to how the forms of communication are shifting, and neglect its continuities with what has recently brought her broader acclaim. Armantrout's writing cloaks itself in skepticism, offering not understanding so much as a restless, probing attention to the relationship between linguistic usage and forms of power. Her work has often