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# Desecrations by Matt Rader

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## History, repetition, and death in Matt Rader's *Desecrations*

### *Desecrations* by MATT RADER

McClelland & Stewart, 2016 \$18.95

Reviewed by KATIE STOBART

For an idea of this collection's subject matter, one need only look to the cover of *Desecrations*. There's the realistic horse before an open plain; an abstract flare or flame or mane dead centre; and above, the sketch of a bulb lighting up. Then, in the lower left corner, old mappings of the tides and everything set between stylized striations that recall geology: metamorphic rock representing the literal passage of time on a grand scale.

Rader is aware of his own poetics and of his literary tradition. The language of Canada's Pacific region (most notably in "Okanagan Gneiss") meets the language of our Western roots (Latin and Rome, Greek myth) and the wide swaths of history—often with a colonial bent—that lie between the present and antiquity. Yet weaving in the past does not burden the poems with archaic phrasing or dry textbook explanations. Connections are made in ways that won't confound contemporary readers; rather, Rader enhances an understanding of how deeply we may be tied to our past, and how relatable it remains.

For instance, *Desecrations* begins with the paraphrased opening lines to Dante's *Inferno*. Where Dante wrote, "I cannot well repeat how there I entered / So full was I of slumber at the moment / In which I had abandoned the true way" (lines 10-12), Rader translates: "Can't point to the place where I near kipped / In those nasty sticks: I was bushed, / Blotto, ready to rack out when I strayed" (lines 10-12). The

rewritten eighteen lines of Canto I transport the reader into a curious space that occupies both past (Dante's poem) and present (Rader's). This opening establishes Rader's literary credibility and opens a portal where the poem is an eternal place. This seemingly innocuous act adds significantly to the sense of mythos throughout the poem and signals the commencement of a journey into the "forest savage" (Dante line 2), into the "wooded maze [where] the good / Old way forward went AWOL, 404, MIA" (Rader lines 2-3). By opening this way, Rader invites the reader on an uncharted exploration of our strange origins—origins that ripple into the future in a series. Origin after origin after origin.

Rader expertly wields repetition throughout *Desecrations* to increase the weight of his meaning and introduce a complex layering of ideas. The strongest examples of such repetition reside in "La Baume Bonne." First he sketches out:

. . . the cliffs of Verdon,  
Prehistory, where-we-come-from.  
That's you  
Shucking snails with a stick. That's me  
learning  
To hide under a hide, naked. (lines 1-4)

The repetition of "hide" seems simple, and the words are clearly homophones. Yet the suggested relationship created by their proximity to one another conflates their meanings. An animal's skin (and in this moment of prehistory we are not permitted to forget we too are animals) is its way of obscuring itself. The separation of the word "naked" emphasizes our association of nudity with vulnerability. So we hide; so we

hide under a hide of something larger,  
tougher than we are.

Later, in “La Baume Bonne,” Rader writes of the “idea of an idea” (8) and says “we imagine we imagine what it was like / Before cooking fires” (lines 12-13). We are given the physical, literal materials by which we map our past: “the slow / sedimentary drip of turquoise minerals” (lines 5-6), but our true method for divining our origins is just that: divination. We have an idea of an idea. We imagine we imagine. Our ancestry, our mythology, the story of how we came into being, is a clearly articulated figment of the imagination. While not undermining the significance of history, Rader delves into the interstices of repetition (remember, history allegedly repeats itself) to expose its poetics, and through its poetics, we can better know ourselves. When he ends the poem “we’ve been / coming here as a family year after year after year” (lines 15-16), Rader overlays two journeys: to the literal place (the cliffs of Verdon) and to the imagined historical one (the cave, prehistory).

Understandably, this approach to history and time includes its fair share of death. The Trojan War poems interspersed through *Desecrations* are the primary but not exclusive site of this exploration. One of my favourite moments in the collection forms the bulk of “Talking Trojan War Blues”:

. . . while the children pedalled  
Their bicycles down the street,  
Dragging their long, late-summer  
                  shadows  
To death behind them. Such tender  
Desecration. Even Achilles’ horses

wept  
In the field of battle days before  
They were made to drag through the  
                  dust  
Hector’s body. (lines 4-11)

The poignancy of this moment, with the twinned dragging of the taller (adult?) shadows behind the children, and the Trojan warrior behind the horses, is in the fulcrum of the two images, where we pause: “Such tender / Desecration” (lines 7-8). To desecrate is to subtract the sacred quality of a thing. We know from an epigraph of Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Boy Breaking Glass” that Rader intends us to relate desecration to the act of creation: the creative act. Can we translate the fullness of our existence and demise? Likely not. But there’s something very close to it hidden in the corners of these elements, and drawn into focus later in the collection, in “From the Lives of North American Horses.” There, Rader writes, “inside such acts of civilization hides the memory of, / and impulse to, wilderness, to violence” (lines 304-305). He asks: “Who is more undone than the child wielding language?” (lines 306-307). How tied we are to our imagined histories, to our words with their hidden crevices and layers hardened over time into their own geology, as our wild selves drag some shadowy thing to death behind us.

#### Works Cited

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**KATIE STOBART** is a writer and editor from Abbotsford, BC. Her poems, prose, and art appear in *Louden Singletree*, and a co-authored chapbook to be released in 2016. She is a co-founder and editor of *Raspberry* magazine, has edited *The Cascade* newspaper, *Louden Singletree*, and the *Pacific Rim Review of Books*.