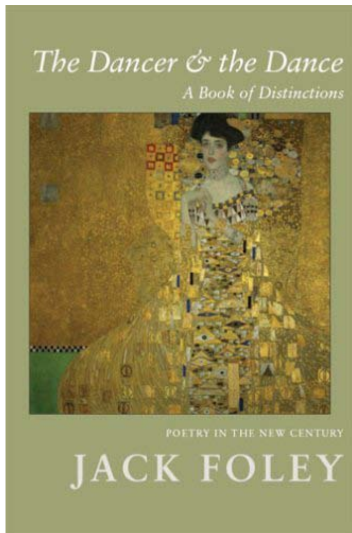

The Dancer & The Dance:
A Book of Distinctions — Poetry in the 21st Century
by Jack Foley
Foreword by Al Young
Red Hen Press, Los Angeles: 2008
271 pages, $19.95
www.redhen.org

Reviewed by George Wallace and Katherine Hastings

I have lost the
certainty of it
but I have found
one leg over the other & roll in the dust

–Jack Foley, "Letters"

This new collection of essays by West Coast poet, playwright, radio broadcaster and critic Jack Foley, with a foreword by California Poet Laureate Al Young, brings together some of the finest effusions of a writer whose discriminating and nuanced analyses stand out in the often indistinctive world of literary criticism.

The Dancer & The Dance: A Book of Distinctions (Red Hen Press 2009), is a welcome introduction to the mind of Foley, a man who combines scholarly erudition with a decidedly non-academic consciousness.

The SF Bay Area-based Foley's regular writings for the online journal *The Alsop Review* and radio show on KPFA in Berkeley have made him a fixture on the alternative/underground commentary scene. His reputation achieved new currency in 2000 when he published the companion volumes, *O Powerful Western Star* and *Foley's Books: California Rebels, Beats and Radicals*—both reviewed with considerable favor by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times.*

Now, Foley follows up on that splash with a solid book of criticism highlighting his diverse reach and vision. Contained in the 271 pages is an astonishingly wide-ranging set of essays that only in part reveals the scope of Foley's eclectic tastes. Here William Butler Yeats goes elbow to elbow with jazz saxophonist Glenn Spearman; Keats and Louis Zukofsky stand shoulder to shoulder with Bertolt

Brecht; and Diane di Prima takes her place at the literary table with Stéphane Mallarmé and Garrison Keillor.

What differentiates this book from the potpourri of Academic Oscurità is the ease and sometimes beauty of the writing—and its refusal to achieve that ease and beauty at the expense of Foley's intense vision of complexity. At the heart of this critic's enterprise is an awareness of the death of God. His title is taken from the concluding line of Yeats' famous poem, "Among School Children"—"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"—and Foley insists rather surprisingly that "Yeats' entire career is an extremely reluctant affirmation of the death of God":

> God is the juice behind the symbols—and if they don't work, God doesn't work either. Similarly, for Mallarmé—with whom Yeats had a considerable affinity—it is not Jesus who comes to save the poet in the terrible "naufrage" of "Brise Marine" but words. Both writers are dealing with a symbolic system which has at its heart the dissolution of the central cultural symbol of the West: God. As the wonderful British children's writer Philip Pullman asks—in a magazine devoted to children's literature—"What happens to the Kingdom of Heaven when the King dies?"
>
> One of the things that happens is that old definitions get reformulated. The notion of selfhood embodied in this book is one of the results of the author's belief in the death (not merely the "absence") of God. The "self" assumed here is not a unified entity—not a "soul"—but something like a "field" in which various elements exist in various relations to one another. Though one can surely find unifying patterns within that field, one cannot find a single pattern which unifies everything. The self of this book is not a unity but a multiplicity—an unstable multiplicity which remains in motion. Many people would of course agree with this idea of selfhood—the self as a "multiplicity of voices"—but clarification is still required as to how this concept of the self as multiplicity affects literary criticism, how the self as multiplicity affects our actual reading of poems. It may be that the self we postulate as we read a poem contradicts the self we experience in the world; it is also possible that familiar poems may be experienced anew by being read in the light of multiplicity.

In his foreword, Young poses the question: "What fueled and ignited Jack Foley's interest in the subjects his emotional spark and intellectual flame illustrated in these pages?" "What's in it for this man," asks Young, "who isn't pumping out commentary and criticism to shore up or defend an academic career?"

In attempting to answer his own question, Young mentions such factors as a lineage that includes a vaudevillian, a formal education in literature, and the qualities of a "careful listener" who takes delight in "looking deeply into a subject."

Indeed, these are essays that unashamedly reveal a person who is delighted with the complex intellectual pleasure of inquiry and explication. Foley "loves to pull back and take the grand pan-infinity overview of life," explains Young, "and he loves just as much to crowd in on technical, aesthetic or socially meaningful minutiae."

Here's Foley on Ginsberg's "Howl" and the obscenity trial which tried to block its publication:

> Even a guilty pleasure can be a testimony to human freedom. "Howl" is closer to the writings of the Marquis de Sade than it is to *The Wasteland*...It is not surprising that such a poem, like the writings of de Sade, should run afoul of the law, but it is certainly ironic that "Howl" had to be defended not as a great blast of anarchic (even pornographic) freedom—which is what it is—but as an outstanding piece of "literature," a monument to the "civilization" that good liberals like Lionel Trilling were strenuously upholding…It's not that "Howl" isn't "literature"—of course it is—but it is not genteel literature; it is in some deep sense *illegal*, but it had to be defended as if it were *A Tale of Two Cities.*

Here he takes on the role of Spoken Word Poetry in a post-Modernist literary world:

> For various reasons, written poetry has always maintained an uneasy relationship to poetry's oral past…At the heart of Western poetry is a split, a confusion, a multimedia situation which is never resolved but which remains in a continual, and at times enormously creative, state of tension. What Walter J. Ong calls "the new orality" of the electronic era has caused critics…to recognize this hidden history of poetry…Modernism is steeped in the performance of poetry—Dylan Thomas was firmly in the tradition of Yeats, Pound and Marinetti when he took to the radio—but the critics who made Modernism famous completely ignored this aspect of its history. Ironically, it was only by *analogy* with presentations in the electronic media that poetry found its way into the current "national consciousness." To put it bluntly: *poetry is the one branch of "literature" which has a performative aspect; it is the one branch of "literature" which can be made to resemble rock-and-roll...*The Spoken Word movement arises out of the need to find some sort of balance between the literary and the electronic, which is to say it arises out of that very crisis of writing which it simultaneously expresses and to some degree resolves..

In a favorable review of feminist Annie Finch's book, *Calendars*, Foley tells us that "Finch's work on metrics is so interesting, illuminating and complex that it threatens to eclipse her considerable accomplishments as a poet." He then goes on to address her poetics, "which functions as a matrix out of which the poems emerge." This is an important essay in the book as Foley emphasizes the use of

and, sometimes, the history of meter in poetry. In the same essay, for instance, we are led to a discussion on the "phallocentric" implications of DH Lawrence's poem, "Whales Weep Not." Finch has a considerable antipathy towards iambic pentameter; dactyls, she insists, as opposed to iambs, are associated with "a feminized alternate system...something quieter, less established, more authentic"; with a "direct spirituality that is so quiet it is almost inaccessible"; with the "beautiful but inaccessible." Foley adds that, indeed, "iambic pentameter has a powerful association not only with phallocentricity—with patriarchy—but with war":

> (It) was invented by the 16th century poet Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, for the specific purpose of translating *The Aeneid*, a poem which begins with one of the most famous dactyls in Western poetry: "Arma Virimque Cano" ("Arms and the Man I Sing")... As Coleridge accurately points out in "Metrical Feet," you can "march" to iambic pentameter—even to a relatively peaceful version of it: "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day." Triple rhythms give us something closer to a dance… Lawrence's poem is deeply phallic…but its phallocentrism does not represent the male member as a weapon, which is the way the phallus is commonly represented in our culture: "This is my rifle / This is my gun / This is for fighting / This is for fun." (Ironically, that doggerel vulgarity is strict dactylic/trochaic—very similar to Finch's verse.) In Lawrence, the phallus… is understood as a "bridge," a "rainbow," and it stands at the center of a communal vision. "Whales Weep Not!" is an image of an ancient community of whales, not of a single whale or even of a couple: "And they rock and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages."

These are typical examples from *The Dancer & The Dance*—plenty of intellect, insight and expertise, and a quirky enough taste that just won't quit. In sum, a volume to be welcomed from a man who, in his ability to raise the tollgate between high and low culture and let his readers ease through, ought to be indispensable reading. Foley makes even literary criticism *new.*