

Kevin Clark

an excerpt of

*How Well We Know So Little: The Sequence in
Post-Postmodern Poetry**

[A long poem] comes to possess the reader and . . .
naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates
him there.

—Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*

Perhaps the most profound pleasure by which a poem
engages one's interest is by revealing to us the inward
motion of another mind.

—Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry*

Twenty-five years ago, critics such as Helen Vendler, M. L. Rosenthal, and James E. Miller lauded the long poem for the way it revealed the poet most intimately. Since then, nearly the entire critical establishment has turned its attention elsewhere. Virtually no one spends time on the merits of the long poem—yet the contemporary poetic sequence, simultaneously unifying and fragmenting itself, captures the anxieties of contemporary life. Since *The Waste Land*, in fact, the sequence may be the best form for expressing both a chaotic culture and destabilized identity. On one hand, by virtue of its length, the sequence can include depictions of many of the societal forces battering the individual. On the other, the sequence's segmentation can effectively render the fracturing of the psyche as it questions its own efficacy.

*An essay-review of

COLOSSEUM. By Katie Ford. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2008. 60 pp. \$15.00, paper.

MODERN HISTORY: PROSE POEMS 1987–2007. By Christopher Buckley. North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2008. 101 pp. \$16.95, paper.

SONATA MULATTICA. By Rita Dove. New York: Norton, 2009. 229 pp. \$24.95.