

Grossman, Allen  
HOW TO DO THINGS WITH TEARS  
New Directions (112 pp.)  
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Grossman, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities at The Johns Hopkins University, has published eight previous volumes of poetry and has won numerous honors, awards, and fellowships for his work, including the Witter Byner Prize for Poetry and an Academy Award for Literature. Billed by its “Low Modern” author as a “HOW TO” book, the current collection is presented as the “autobiography of the SIGHTED SINGER, the American poet who has dreamed the dream of the poet’s vocation.” Unfortunately, he could only daydream about conjuring any actual poetry. Grossman’s idea of a poem is an assemblage of stanzas shaved line by line from blocks of dense intellectual prose, creating verse so vapid, repetitive, and pointless that it could be construed as profound if only these head-births meant something. As embellishments to what needs none, he tosses in truisms and trite expressions, paraphrased in order to appear original. Thus we have “the hour before dawn, the darkest one” and “Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.” Deepest of all is this prize: “Sex is better than death although not so easy to come by.” He sprinkles in the right number of French, German, Latin, and Italian phrases to complete the illusion of erudition, then translates them just in case his readers are the unlearned lunkheads he suspects. The poet speaks of an “aged pensioner” and a “boat of some kind,” but these are neither a real person nor a seaworthy vessel, and it’s doubtful Grossman ever encountered either. They are merely cliches, abstractions begotten by other abstractions, intellectual exercises kneaded into the Wonder Bread of Poetry.

The poet recommends staring “a dog intently in the eye, any dog! It may recite an astounding poem to you.” For once he’s right. There’s a greater likelihood of that occurring than the reader’s encountering any astounding poems here.