"Etc., Etc.": The Post-Punk Ballad of Rodger Young

by SCOTT SAUL

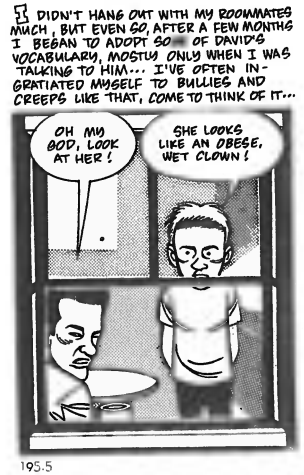
Everyone knows it's not easy to be a teenager, but few have captured, as Daniel Clowes does through his character of Rodger Young, the everyday woe of adolescence, the anxious search to find the right face to present to the world. "I struggled to be thought of as someone who housed a vital and complicated inner world": so Rodger signs off "Like a Weed, Joe" (1995), describing how he returned, as a young teenager, to "the city" and transitioned to a new school. It's a typical Clowes line, double-edged in its sympathy and mockery, kind and wicked at once, suggesting how we regard our past selves with both indulgence and disdain. The post-adolescent Rodger, narrating the story, looks at the adolescent self within it and appreciates his yearning to have a "vital and complicated inner world" — the sort of self-consciousness that, after all, separates adulthood from childhood. But the older Rodger undercuts the younger Rodger too, insinuating that he's an emotional poser who needs to be "thought of" as complicated, someone who's interested more in projecting an inner life than in actually having one. Giving this irony a further kink, Clowes always draws the younger Rodger with pinpoint eyes, which lend him a hard, blank expression. It's as if Rodger wishes simultaneously to be read as a "deep" person and not to be read at all.

"Blue Italian Shit" (1994) meets up with Rodger five years later, upon his move to the "big city" in 1979. He's eighteen now, a would-be punk, and still has those pinpoint eyes in every panel, but he's also gained a set of prematurely bruised cheekbones. As the story's first image intimates, he has become one of the city's walking wounded. Rodger is heading down a deserted city street, caught in the glare of a streetlight that illuminates signs of the city's decay: liquid pooling around the sewer grate, broken glass and a crumpled can on the sidewalk. On the graffiti-covered wall behind him, Keith Haring's radiant baby — a symbol of hope — is poised to crawl into a jagged, cracked window; the Jean-Michel Basquiat tag "SAMO" has been crossed out and labeled "toy," a tag used by graffiti writers to "diss" what they see as poor work. The wall, one might say, is as bruised as Rodger's cheekbones. In

a nice twist, Rodger is walking right-to-left — against the grain of how we read, and straight into an extremely dark patch, lit up only by the "BLUE ITALIAN SHIT" of the title. The story promises to be, in short, Rodger's reckoning with some serious shit.

193.1

But what kind of reckoning will this be? Not a reckoning with destiny, which presumes some sort of order to the world and its mechanisms. Instead, "Blue Italian Shit" offers a reckoning with the force of drift, with the anomie that besets those who feel at odds with their moment and milieu. Rodger begins his story, "So anyway, my name is Rodger Young, etc., etc," and those "etceteras" telegraph both how he prefers not to dwell on his life's details and how he feels like an 'etcetera' himself (193.1). Tellingly, the phrase "blue Italian shit" is not even his own. "I told her she looked nice," Rodger's misanthropic roommate David says at the dining room table while Rodger pretends to read something, "but I was thinking 'tell me: in what exact year was it fashionable to wear blue Italian shit?'" (195.3). David's cruelty is contagious, and two panels later, Rodger has adopted it as his own (though he can't quite match David's sadistic panache). When David says "Oh my God, look at her!" from the safe distance of their apartment window, Rodger piles on "She looks like an obese, wet clown!" (195.5). A mimic man, Rodger is enmeshed in other people's attitudes, other people's language, adopting their attitudes as his own while privately keeping his mental distance. "I've often ingratiated myself to bullies and creeps like that," he admits (195.5).



195.5

Even Rodger's name is not his own, but rather comes with an improbable and heavy mantle. Rodger Young (1918-1943) was a US army rifleman who, when his patrol was ambushed by Japanese soldiers on the Solomon Islands during World War II, chose to rush the enemy so that the rest of his company might escape. Young was memorialized in Frank Loesser's 1945 "Ballad of Rodger Young," which soon hit the airwaves through an earnest rendition by folksinger Burl Ives and was later name-checked by Robert Heinlein in his novel *Starship Troopers* (1959). The song is awash in the kind of patriotic fervor that a fine tale of martyrdom can prompt: "Rodger Young / fought and died for the men he marched among. / In the everlasting annals of the infantry / Glows the last deed of Private Rodger Young." Which is to say: this Rodger Young is a far cry from the "etc., etc." who narrates "Blue Italian Shit." The first Rodger willingly sacrificed his life for a greater cause, and then the cause turned him into an exemplar. Clowes's Rodger wears leather jacket and black jeans rather than army khaki, and is part of a loose-knit punk cadre, whose official ethos runs close to nihilism. When approached in an elevator by some hippie-ish anti-nuclear activists, he comes back with a blustery "Fuck off! You should be honored to be part of the last generation!" (194.4).

Rodger Young, an American hero

• • •

Unlike the earlier Rodger, Clowes's Rodger has no heroic frame for his own action, no central motivating force for his life. This absence helps explain why "Blue Italian Shit," which covers only seven pages, is episodic in structure. It's as if Rodger has ceded control of his story to the other people he collides with, often without rhyme or reason. Much of "Blue Italian Shit" involves Rodger's parsing of his three roommates, none of whom he seems to have chosen out of elective affinity. There's the aforementioned David, who channels his own squeamishness ("The only thing more disgusting than eating or shitting is having a baby!" (195.1)) into cruel attacks on the bodies of others. There's Nat, who plays id to David's superego and is a caricature of the guy who "lets it all hang out," walking around the apartment in the nude and snacking on "Wonder Bread smothered in ranch dressing" (194.7). And there's Larry, "the saddest and most fascinating of all roommates" and "the textbook definition of a creep" who uses a spyglass to peruse any woman who enters their building, then aggressively dresses them down

198.4

("She's always got her nose in the air . . . thinks she's really something special . . .") (197.1-2). All of Rodger's roommates are loners who fail to understand how skeptically Rodger perceives them — who reveal themselves to him even though, in panel after panel, he's turned away from them, munching on his cereal or reading *Punk* magazine.

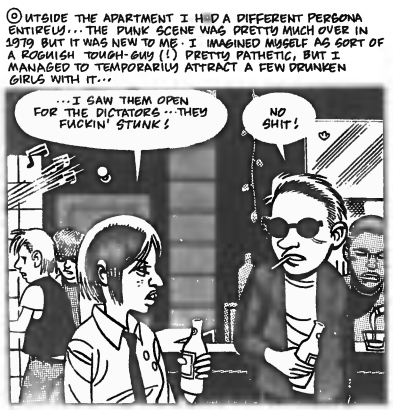
Given Rodger's trenchant perspective on his roommates — creeps all — one might expect the overall tone of "Blue Italian Shit" to be sour. And a good part of the story does seem to illustrate, in a punk vein, how the world deforms people, turning Nat into a fried-chicken-eating idiot and Larry into a hoarder of petty resentments. But there's also a camaraderie that's felt between the lines of the story, in the way that Rodger addresses the reader. We become, in a sense, the roommate that Rodger never had: the simpatico soul who hears Rodger's "etc., etc." and is happy to let him skip over those details, partly because we sense that other, more important confessions are in the offing. And importantly, we do *hear* Rodger's voice, which comes to us with the immediacy and casualness of spoken language ("So anyway ..."). In this respect, "Blue Italian Shit" is a descendant of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the prototypical novel of teen rebellion, in which Holden Caulfield's cynical analysis of the world's "phoniness" is counterbalanced by his earnest appeal to an imagined reader, one who will flow with every narrative digression and feel, sympathetically, the pain of Holden's crack-up.

In "Blue Italian Shit," the tenderness of the story comes out in isolated moments, when Rodger or his roommates take off the masks they usually wear and reveal some curious and vulnerable part of themselves. In a panel that is spatially isolated too — set in the dead center of a page otherwise dominated by snark — Rodger glimpses the psychologically defended David through a cracked open bedroom door, where he's "gyrating stiffly on his bed to a Connie Francis record" (195.4). The record, we determine through the lyrics wafting out of his room, is "Kiss 'N' Twist," and David's gyrations, it seems, are his attempt to twist in the spirit of the record. There's a great deal of pathos in the details here: David is fully clothed, wearing the same shirt, pants, and dress shoes that he wears elsewhere; his face and body are turned into the bed, as if he were making love to it, but there's

no embrace there. Even in the privacy of his bedroom and the furthest reaches of his fantasy life, David seems coiled — stiffened rather than loosened. Add to this pathos the "Connie Francis-ness of it all" — the fact that Francis had a sobbing vocal style; that she had a notoriously doomed love life; that she was exceedingly popular in the late '50s, but by the early '60s the moment of "Kiss 'N' Twist" had become unfashionable, leading her to try to cash in on the "Twist" craze — and David's moment on the bed becomes not just "pretty weird" (in the words of Rodger) but weirdly illuminating. It reveals how much David has paid, in the price of his own personality, for the wised-up attitude he adopts for the world. And it suggests how much he lives out of synch with his time: What other young person would, in 1979, have turned to Connie Francis to get his ya-yas out?

195.4

Rodger has similar moments of self-disclosure, though in his case it is the punk mask that fails him. Just after he tells the "no nukes" hippies to embrace their doom, he admits that he suffers every night from nightmare visions of his own — agents arresting him, say, for draft evasion. And in the panel after he adopts a "roguish tough guy" pose at a punk club, he confesses that he couldn't keep up the pose and play the role to the hilt: "it was essential to get away before I said something to destroy the illusion" (195.7). Clowes's illustrations here underscore how easily the pose can start to substitute for the man — how the trappings of one's identity can become one's identity in full. On the left panel, Rodger talks to a dour-looking punkette while holding a bottle and wearing sunglasses, dark jacket, and T-shirt; on the right panel, we see another man talking to another dour-looking punkette while holding a bottle and wearing sunglasses, dark jacket, and T-shirt. Clowes sets us up for a double take: it's as if the second man is Rodger's stand-in, part of a legion of punk dudes who could take Rodger's place should he decide to leave the scene.



• • •

We might call "Blue Italian Shit" a post-punk rather than a punk comic, in that one of its major themes is belatedness: the difficulty of living behind the cultural curve, in the moment of "post-." Rodger has come to punk out of his distaste for the cultural waves of the past, and one senses that his wanderings are his attempt to find his place, his time, from within the late-'70s urban crisis. He's not part of the no-nukes, hippie-ish crowd, identified with the ethos of the '60s. He's not part of the disco scene of the mid-'70s: we see him horrified when a hair stylist, swept up by the vogue of *Saturday Night Fever*, gives him a John Travolta haircut and confers on him an ironic "fifteen minutes" of ersatz fame as a Travolta wannabe ("I always think about that — there were fifteen minutes on this earth when I had a John Travolta haircut!" (194.3)). But Rodger also feels like a latecomer to punk. "The punk scene was pretty much over in 1979 but it was new to me," Rodger says (195.6). A running joke in "Blue Italian Shit" has Rodger called out by strangers with "Yo Devo!" — a sign that, for all his identification with punk, he's being seen as part of the commercial aftershock of New Wave. (Devo had released *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* and appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in 1978.) Yet ironically, Rodger's feeling of belatedness might actually be more representative, among fans of punk music, than any sense of timeliness. In the mythology of punk, there's always some origin moment — the Sex Pistols in London in 1975, the Ramones in New York in 1974, the Stooges in Detroit in 1968 — that makes one's own time seem a postscript to the first starburst of punk energy.

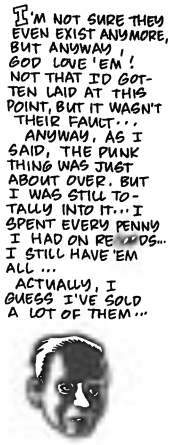
193.3

198.4

Compounding this sense of belatedness is Rodger's sideways engagement with the punk scene itself. He seems interested less in participating in the aggression of punk than in spectating, absorbing it atmospherically. Outside the clubs, he is a punk fetishist, collecting records and reading the fanzines; inside the clubs, he is a clumsy participant at the misfit's ball, an oddity among oddfellows. We see him

missing the signals that "punk girls" eagerly send his way, bungling the conversations because he can't pick up on the flirtatious subtext. The question "What does your button say?" prompts an uneasy "uh . . . i-it's a band . . ." (198.5); the question "Where did you get those shoes?" is met by a startled, defensive stare (196.5). In these moments, Rodger's ineptitude creates a sort of punk comedy of manners, with Rodger serving as the butt of his own joke — the guy whose "cool" is a flimsy mask covering his inexperience in the world and within the punk scene in particular.

Ironically, by making himself the butt of his own joke, Rodger also establishes an unexpected sense of intimacy with the reader. This aspect of the "Clowes touch" is perhaps most evident in a curious panel — the only one like it in "Blue Italian Shit" — where Rodger appears as a bodiless narrator, a mere floating head. Here Rodger is half-swallowed in the sort of garish shadow that might be found in film noir or a horror flick: he is rendered uglier than in any other panel, though at the same time his eyes are finally enlarged beyond pinpoints. The *narrating* Rodger, that is, seems to have a vision that the Rodger within the story lacks, even as his appearance has become far from congenial. "[T]he punk thing was just about over," he says in retrospect in this panel, "but I was still totally into it . . . I spent every penny I had on records. . . I still have 'em all . . ." Then he adds, with a casualness that belies the importance of the confession, "Actually, I guess I've sold a lot of them . . ." (197.6). Here Clowes seems to be experimenting with his readers, pushing them away from Rodger and pulling them closer to him at the same time. On the one hand, the image turns Rodger into a grotesque, another face in the freak show of the story. On the other hand, the text allows him the complexity of being a man of contradictions — a person who can both define himself by his investment in punk and yet sell off the mementos that testify to that investment. He's less and more than we have reason to expect.



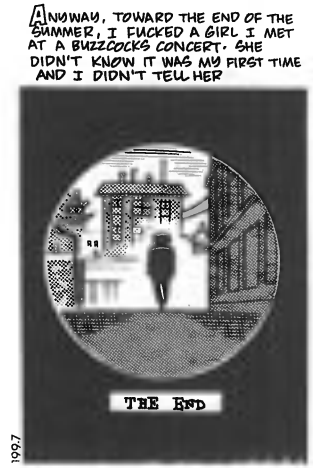
196.4

• • •

Near the end of "Blue Italian Shit," Rodger remembers a magic, ephemeral encounter with a beautiful young woman in the deserted streets of the city at dawn — two smiles exchanged between strangers — and reflects upon how he "watched her disappear like the pathetic, 'romantic' coward I was (and still am), I guess" (199.4). He calls it a "perfect moment" not because it led anywhere, but precisely because it didn't: "people like me probably don't want anything to actually happen to them anyway" (199.4). "Blue Italian Shit" manages to be both romantic and anti-romantic, holding up the ideals of youth even as it forces us to recognize how poorly our reality conforms to our dreams. We have romance, the story seems

to suggest, partly so we can hold our world to an impossible standard and then take a cynical delight when it fails to meet that standard, and partly so that we can high-mindedly abstain from its nitty-gritty realities. "Romantic," in this sense, deserves to be placed in quotation marks by Rodger, since his story dramatizes the unintended consequences of being romantic, or at least of being an unsuccessful, halfway romantic: the pain of feeling at a remove from everyday encounters, the pathos of a life that feels like it's missing a dimension.

199.4



199.7

The one consolation — and it may be meager — is that the Rodger who narrates (and who is no longer "young") has us, the imagined reader, to catch his story. "Anyway," he closes "Blue Italian Shit," "toward the end of the summer, I fucked a girl I met at a Buzzcocks concert. She didn't know it was my first time and I didn't tell her" (199.7). But he has just told *us*, making himself vulnerable even while literally turning his back and walking away from us in the final panel of his story — in a visual echo of the beautiful woman who has just walked away from him. He's gone, along with his youth. What will we, seemingly his only companions, make of his ever-guarded self-disclosure?

SCOTT SAUL writes frequently on American culture and politics for *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *Boston Review*, and other publications. He is the author of *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Harvard University Press, 2003) and a forthcoming biography of comedian Richard Pryor. He teaches courses in American culture and history at the University of California at Berkeley, where he is an Associate Professor of English and American Studies. "'Etc., Etc.': The Post-Punk Ballad of Rodger Young" was written for *The Daniel Clowes Reader*.