

BOOK REVIEWS

Franke, Astrid. *Pursue the Illusion: Problems of Public Poetry in America. European Views of the United States 2*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER, 2010. 281 p. ISBN 978-3-8253-5751-1.

Astrid Franke's monograph investigates a tradition of public poetry through analysis of American poets from Phillis Wheatley to Robert Hayden. Moreover, in a final chapter she discusses three post-9/11 anthologies of antiwar poetry. A winner of the 2009 EAAS Rob Kroes Publication Award, *Pursue the Illusion* contributes to the field of literary and cultural studies by foregrounding less prominent 20th-century poets like Muriel Rukeyser and Robert Hayden in the light of their public poetry. Even major figures like Henry Longfellow, Walt Whitman, and Robert Lowell are examined from a fresh perspective.

Franke bases her analysis on pragmatic theories of the public sphere that were drafted by John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) and developed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Of the two approaches, she finds more useful Dewey's vision of "the public . . . as a particular moment in the process of political action" (8). Following this argument, art "as communication contributes to a process of self-recognition, and thus helps to establish a public as a [democratic] sphere of social reflexivity" (14). In her analyses of poets and their works, Franke first uncovers "the relation between poet and public as implied and construed in the poem," and, second, attempts to "trace the tensions within the text . . . in order to relate them to unresolved problems of the public" (26). This approach proves interesting, yet in some of the poets examined in the third chapter Franke works with an insufficient body of poems, which undermines her interpretations and makes them less valid.

In the first chapter, Franke juxtaposes Phillis Wheatley and Philip Freneau, two late-18th-century American authors whose poetry had the ambition to achieve "a unity of public, poetry, and politics" (28). They both "struggled to reshape the conventions of public poetry available to them: the funeral poem, the panegyric, the ode, and the elegy" (35). In Franke's opinion, Wheatley, a black female slave who had to pass a writing trial before her poems could be published, became America's "melancholy muse," whose poetry made her a household name. Centuries before she was able to affect readers with confessional poetry about her experience of being an African American slave of special status, Wheatley "not only invokes the muse but boldly refers to herself as one" (56). Freneau, a member of the white educated elite, developed as a poet from an early reviser of Augustan pastoral poems to a poet of the Revolution, only to end as an elegist. According to Franke, Freneau's poetry is limited as it is "bound to the Deweyan idea of democracy as a cultural challenge rather than merely a system of electing the government" (78) wherein the poet must prefer reason to imagination, like the British

Lake Poets. While Freneau is best known for his poems about the American pastoral and the Revolution, Franke highlights the importance of his elegies.

The second chapter focuses on Longfellow and Whitman, 19th-century poets whose claims for public attention, according to Franke, “rested less on their comments about public issues than on their exemplary personae, created through their poems and the carefully chosen portraits that appeared in their books” (89). One might easily disagree with her and argue that both poets did embrace the role of public speakers, different from their poetic selves. Franke analyzes Longfellow’s early *Poems on Slavery* (1842) to highlight the problem of writing about a topic of public interest. In these poems on painful subjects, Longfellow, in Franke’s opinion, reaches the limits of his style, a formally accomplished genteel poetry that strives to control and balance the passions and “the violence lurking in the heart of America” (105). She can see the same problem of self-restraint even in Longfellow’s major poems such as “The Psalm of Life,” and longer narrative poems, including “The Building of the Ship” and “The Courtship of Miles Standish.” Although the ship poem drew large audiences, the poet failed to marry subject matter of national significance with a modern language and form. Trying to be a popular and democratic author, Longfellow strives to speak plainly, but, like Priscilla in “The Courtship of Miles Standish,” the poet “suppresses passions and energies that are so clearly an undercurrent of his poetry” (119). If Longfellow’s genteel sensibility precluded his poetic achievement from writing a public poetry that plucks all the strings, Walt Whitman managed to do just that. Whereas Longfellow could not escape sentimentality and self-conscious artistry, Whitman early became bold enough to “transform sentimental rhetoric” into a fully modern poetic idiom (121). Franke identifies an interesting problem of Whitman’s poetry, namely a defect of the persona in many poems, which become “strangely impersonal” and require an “imaginative leap” so that the readers, too, might celebrate themselves (124–25). One may agree that while, in “Song of Myself,” Whitman still does not quite appeal to a wider readership, in *Drum-Taps* (1865) he introduces the mature voice of a poet who integrates traumatic war experiences into peacetime life (133). Whitman’s innovative practices, however, did not fare well with his audience, as is documented by the popular success of “O Captain! My Captain!,” a sentimental rhymed lament in ballad meter that was not typical of his major work. Finally, Franke stresses the centrality of a late Whitman masterpiece, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” in which the poet “figured out how to attribute national significance to Lincoln’s death while simultaneously divorcing the president from the political endeavor for which he is known” (140).

The third chapter reviews the first decades of the 20th century, in which American poetry witnessed the rise of modernism, populism, and radicalism. Franke portrays four very different poets—Vachel Lindsay, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Muriel Rukeyser. This chapter is the most problematic of the whole book since Franke makes questionable poem choices and bases

her argument on a very limited body of poems. Lindsay is discussed as a populist writer who merged elements of popular song and entertainment to reach “a mass audience in an attempt to revive the image of the poet as bard and to convert a large and anonymous audience into a community” (150). Franke examines “The Kallyope Yell,” a poem in which Lindsay celebrates poetry as an auditory spectacle, juxtaposing “the sacred and the profane” (155) to shock readers with a Whitmanian exuberance, while still using a form that comes closer to ordinary readers and consumers of cheap public entertainment. Franke claims that at his best, Lindsay brings poetry to the masses and entertains them with a poetic burlesque. The pitfall of his public voice, however, lies in his obtrusive manipulation of his readers by using persuasive techniques pioneered in “commercial advertising, public relations, propaganda, and defamatory campaigns” (192). While the Lindsay argument seems persuasive, it is not well served by Franke analyzing a single poem.

The author proceeds to have a cursory look at T. S. Eliot, juxtaposing this most private, consciously elitist of high moderns with his more public poetic contemporaries. Again, a too-brief mention is made of “Portrait of a Lady” and “The Waste Land,” which does both poems injustice. The latter poem is hailed as having “a peculiar potential as public art” (165) by sharing with its readers the fragmented voices of cultural history and the present. The omission of Ezra Pound from Franke’s discussion of the moderns leaves one baffled, for his many poems on the art of poetry and the need to revise public taste would have made a useful comparison. The next poet featured in this chapter is William Carlos Williams, a contemporary of Eliot who cares about Deweyan notions of art as an enterprise in democratic participation. Looking at “Tract,” an early poem of considerable didacticism, Franke shows how Williams teaches his audience the reversal of the public and private spheres (170). Williams’ avoidance of symbolism and his adoption of simple language and form evoke for her an “egalitarian spirit and an awareness that permits one to examine and revise collective gestures” (172).

The last poet discussed in the third chapter is Muriel Rukeyser, a less well-known radical feminist poet. In her seminal collection *The Book of the Dead* (1938) she merges modernist experiment with social criticism. Using Eliotic fragmentation and documentary language of law to expose “the practices of big businesses” (183), Rukeyser achieves a unique effect of mourning the victims of a mining disaster without anger, seeking compassion “that drives the mind to relate the dead to the living, to bridge the gap between factual and emotional knowledge” (188). While the inclusion of Rukeyser alongside the more famous modernists is useful and the brief analysis of her work innovative, the treatment of public poems by Lindsay, Eliot, and Williams in this chapter is far from adequate, while the omission of Pound is untenable.

The fourth chapter focuses on two postwar poets who tried to revise cultural history—Robert Lowell and Robert Hayden. While the choice of Lowell is predictable, the inclusion of Hayden, an African American poet whose modernist versions of black history were outdated in the 1960s, is

surprising. Lowell, an American poetic voice from the 1940s through the 1970s, is analyzed through readings of his major poems in which the speaker is “[w]atching a public issue through a medium and then turning himself into one” (202). Franke succinctly exposes Lowell’s major weakness as a public poet, that is, his failure to merge the self and the public, for “the self threatens to drown in narcissism and the public becomes a stage for the eternal ironies of history” (215). If the choice of Robert Hayden seems odd, for there are more public and iconoclastic black poets of the 1960s to discuss, juxtaposing his public poetry with that of Lowell makes Hayden a surprisingly powerful speaker of the age. Avoiding the angry tone and militant readings of American culture which were produced by some of his African American peers (for example, Amiri Baraka), Hayden produces elegiac poetry which combines “imagery and symbolism with legal documents, prayers, and short narratives in an Eliotic assembly of voices and personae” (221). Moreover, Hayden copes with the traditional problem of a mainstream audience that is blind to ethnic America’s history of injustice and suffering. “Middle Passage,” the poem Franke chose as central for documenting the restrained poet-critic of past persecution, is a remainder “that distorted vision and the difficulty of self-knowledge are central issues in African American writing” (231). Ultimately, Hayden succeeds where Lowell fails, namely in winning a share of public attention for the poetry of private suffering.

In the final chapter Franke examines the modes of American poetry dealing with the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. She looks at three major American anthologies of recent antiwar poetry—*Poets against the War* (2003), *Cry Out: Poets Protest the War* (2003), and *enough* (2003). The dominant aspect of all three anthologies is disgust with politics and an attempt to relate public suffering to individual lyric utterance. This, however, makes the poet unable to “see oneself as an individual agent of change” (238). That is why in America, “a public poet today is likely to be a ‘poet.org’ rather than a charismatic individual” (238) with the sort of reputation enjoyed by writers in the previous centuries. This chapter betrays another deficiency of Franke’s book. Readings of several post-9/11 poems that fit the frame of Franke’s argument about public poetry are included, yet the paradigmatic short lyric poems in the post-confessional mode do not represent all recent American poetry on the subject of war. For example, nothing is mentioned of the formalist poetry of the major 1960s poets like Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan, who both wrote important public poems of artistic value and formal diversity, transcending the clichés of free verse antiwar poetry. The main omission in this chapter is, however, Galway Kinnell, the legendary author of a lot of antiwar, socially-conscious poetry. The masterpiece of anti-terrorist poetry that is ignored is Kinnell’s “When the Towers Fell,” a Whitmanesque polyphonic elegy of cosmic proportions, ambition, and appeal that evokes the metaphysical angst of the poet witnessing the 9/11 attack and its victims and aftermath. In comparison, the anti-war, anti-government poems discussed in this chapter seem like the

formulaic work of free verse poetasters who fail to relate the experience of remote war and suffering to their embarrassed sense of prosperity. Likewise ignored is the post-1980s proliferation of the American workshop poem in the confessional mode, as well as the ongoing critical debates about form and its absence in recent American poetry. While Franke briefly addresses *Poetry and the Public* (2002), a book-length study by Joseph Harrington, there is no discussion of the much-discussed and influential 1990s endeavor of New Formalist poet-critics like Dana Gioia and proponents of poetry slams who have tried, Lindsay-like, to bring poetry back to the spotlight of public attention.

Despite the omissions and several questionable choices of poets and poems, the book is a useful addition to the body of recent studies of American poetry and its public manifestations, explaining cogently why American poets since the 18th century have been trying, as Whitman put it in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, “to cheer up slaves and horrify despots” with poetry that incorporates the public and private spheres in a combination of formal excellence and aesthetic value.

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Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature, edited by Šárka Bubíková. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice; Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2008. 176 p. ISBN 978-80-7395-091-0.

Literatures for children and young adults have gained prominence in literary studies in recent years, and yet there are hardly any monographs that testify to this trend in the Central European milieu. Šárka Bubíková has enlisted seven collaborators from respected research institutions to aid her in redressing this imbalance. The final product manages to imbue childhood and young adulthood in fiction with a critical framework, adequate terminology and (with two exceptions) well-chosen “case studies.” The initial section by Šárka Bubíková, the mastermind behind the project, offers a short historical introduction to childhood and the teenage years as depicted in literature, tracing the subject matter from Puritan times till the postmodern era. The book title, vague as it is, seems to suggest that its focus will be not only on books aimed at children, as well as those preferred and read by children throughout history and, especially, nowadays, but also that it will cover narratives of growing up for a general audience.

As becomes obvious, young readers may favor virtually any genre, be it children’s classics, manga, graphic novels, vampire romances, or even Christian allegories. By the same token, not every book dealing with

childhood and growing up has been primarily targeted at this age group; for example, Victorian social novels featuring children were meant first and foremost to sway the opinions of adults. Trends in literature for children and young adults have a way of passing quickly, unpredictability being the only certainty, and yet an attempt at “venturing into the unpredictable” should have been made in *Literary Childhoods*. Sadly, this did not happen.

Šárka Bubíková has not only provided a theoretical framework and terminology for *Literary Childhoods* but also contributed three more chapters, one of them in collaboration with Hana Štráchalová. This one, “Becoming Little Women,” based on the contrast between a carefree childhood and the repressive clutches of newly found adulthood in a popular American classic, Louise May Alcott’s *Little Women*, may be considered one of the highlights of the volume. It contrasts two different layers of Alcott’s book: one a moral tale Alcott was pressed to write, paying lip service to the contemporary dogmas about the provinces of young womanhood, and another one, made up of apparent “flaws” in the narrative, undermining the book’s original preoccupation with ideal womanhood that amounts to a thinly veiled, angry revolt of the author trapped in a world of her own making.

The two remaining essays by Šárka Bubíková, “Growing Up and the Quest for Identity” and “Growing Up Postmodern,” concern the process of several young people’s initiation into the world around them, a process further complicated by their multicultural, elusive backgrounds and multifaceted identities: in Gish Jen’s 1996 novel *Mona in the Promised Land*, as Bubíková writes, “the Jewish American boy Seth lives in a teepee and studies Eastern religious traditions, while the novel’s protagonist, the Chinese American Mona, converts to Judaism” (137) and “her sister’s African American roommate Naomi cooks ‘Chinese food so genuine Mona finds it an encounter,’ doing an ‘authentic tea-smoked duck’ . . . while Mona herself follows her mother’s favorite recipe . . . where ‘the whole secret is soaking the duck overnight in Pepsi-Cola’” (137).

The rest of the volume consists of individual essays on the notion of childhood in British and American literatures, reflecting the fields of interest of the individual researchers. Patricia Ráčková delves deep into Rudyard Kipling’s *Mowgli Stories*, utilizing Hannah Arendt’s concept of a dual identity of the self, based on Mowgli finding himself a double outcast between his “Man-Pack” and “Wolf-Pack.” Milada Franková gives scope to the youthful rebellion of the protagonists in three novels by the British author Jane Gardam, featuring the negotiation of spirited, freedom-loving and observant children with authority. Libora Oates-Indruchová regards all the Harry Potter books as a politically loaded brand of *Bildungsroman*. Petr Chalupský devotes his attention to sinister and less-than-innocent childhoods in major novels by Ian McEwan.

However, two essays published in the volume lack the common denominator unifying the other texts of the collective work: Zofia Kolbuszewska’s article on Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* and Ewa

Kowal's "Motifs of Childhood in the '9/11' Genre." Their claim to appearing in a volume dedicated to childhood and growing up seems to rest mostly on the timeless truth that deep down there is an inner, lost child in each of us. The efforts of the two above-mentioned scholars are also marred by their taking undue liberties with their terminology, which is both quite inconsistent with that used in other contributions and obscures the issues at hand rather than helping to clarify them. How should we decipher, for example, Kolbuszewska's discovery that "[t]he plot of *Something Happened* thus employs the metonymic process of collapsing metaphor as a transformation which leads to the transactive metaphor ending the narrative" (127)? Concerning Eva Kowal's article, it is even highly questionable whether "9/11" fiction can be treated as a separate genre.

If a book aims to cover critical assessments of literature spanning well over two centuries and two continents, a degree of eclecticism needs to be taken into account and allowances made for it. Šárka Bubíková and her team of collaborators never aimed at providing the academic community with analyses of the full spectrum of narratives of childhood and young adulthood in British and American literature, merely to "offer a comprehensive overview of the issue, showing the complexity and potential of such an enterprise to introduce this interesting topic into the Czech study of British and American cultures, to create a basis for further research and discussion" (7).

Quite certainly, the book lives up to this very modest expectation and achieves a goal greater than the one the writers settled for. *Literary Childhoods* is a pioneering work in its field and, hopefully, not the last one of its kind.

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