

MIKE CHASAR, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 336 pp.

Mike Chasar's rewarding study takes its cues from the observations that much more poetry was read and written during the modernist period than we assume today and that the canonical masterpieces we associate with the period comprise only a small segment of that poetry. The study pursues "four overarching theses" (9): that ordinary readers of poetry were more discerning than scholarship has assumed; that popular poetry of the period was more complex than existing scholarship suggests; that this poetry influenced now-canonical modernist writers in ways ignored by scholarship; and that it served as a laboratory for popular culture as we know it today. While 'scholarship' becomes something of a punching bag here, the study turns each of its theses to good use, both to organize its material and to extract surprising, entertaining, and highly illuminative insights into the vast realm of popular poetry in mid-twentieth-century America. Its focus on the concrete and the everyday usefully complements studies of canonic poetry and popular culture, most importantly Marjorie Perloff's *Radical Artifice* (1991), and its wide range offers a more comprehensive perspective than thematic studies such as Mark Van Wienen's noteworthy *Partisans and Poets* (1997).

I will address its five chapters one after the other, not only because each opens up a small world of its own but because this procedure will allow me to move from criticism to praise, emphasizing the latter. My criticism will focus on the first chapter, an examination of poetry scrapbooks by ordinary Americans that illustrates both Chasar's strategies of validating his material and the problems these strategies can create. The chapter opens with a number of insightful observations about scrapbooking: it shows how ordinary readers moved easily between what we now regard as high and popular poetry; how the "quoting, cut-up, and collage practices of modernist writing" parallel those of scrapbookers (42); and how a number of now-canonical writers either assembled scrapbooks themselves or referenced them in their writing. It is when Chasar begins his examination of individual scrapbooks that things get tricky.

To justify his detailed scholarly analysis of these scrapbooks, he posits that they express

their owners' political attitudes and that these attitudes can be described in the terminology of agency and empowerment fashionable in current academia. It soon turns out, however, that there is little textual or contextual evidence for this claim. Most of the scrapbookers Chasar discusses are middle-class women from the mid-twentieth century, whose collections, far from expressing feminist belligerence, "tend toward respectful, controlled rhetoric and ethical feminine virtue" (71). As for contextual evidence, Chasar himself points out that he does not have any information about these women aside from their gender and the dating of their scrapbooks. His attempt to build elaborate political arguments on such scant evidence results in formidable overreadings. One unknown collector, we are informed, uses her scrapbook to resist "what she felt were the limiting and outdated values of a World War II-era literary establishment" (62). The fact that the collector's favorite poet, a certain Robert T. Coffin, was a perfect representative of that establishment and its values—characteristic titles include "I Still Look Up," "Joy Meets Boy," and "Late Christmas"—spirals Chasar into a breathtaking series of conflations at whose end the avuncular Coffin comes to exemplify "masculinist authorial practices and their associated cultural virtues of hate and war" (72). Similarly, the collector's fondness for feminine, domestic imagery generates musings about "latent," "nearly repressed," and "sublimated" fantasies of emasculation (71-72). Chasar goes on to read these speculations into a drawing of a dying soldier paired with a child's farewell to a father departing for the war, which likely commemorates the death of an acquaintance, or even of the collector's own father, in World War II. This never seems to occur to Chasar, who reads the farewell poem as a Freudian rejection of "male writing and male cultural values" and the dying soldier in the drawing as "emasculat[ed]" because his pistol is "pointed impotently downward, immediately in front of the figure's crotch" (73-74). The dominance of such jargon-ridden projection over empathetic analysis makes chapter one the weak spot in an otherwise convincing study.

Chasar seems to find his interpretive balance in chapter two, a discussion of poetry in early radio broadcasting, which still contains occasional nuggets of jargon—one broadcast is described as a "queered wireless space" (88)—but builds its arguments on much stron-

ger evidence. The chapter draws on taped broadcasts and fan mail to examine the participatory dynamics of radio poetry shows, which offered listeners the opportunity to voice cultural criticism via poems and letters read out on air. Noting the hosts' repeated references to scrapbooking, Chasar insightfully argues that this familiar activity became a "guiding metaphor" for the radio shows, familiarizing listeners with the new medium while at the same time emphasizing its interactive potential (89). In a similar vein, chapter three examines the widespread use of poetry in advertising campaigns to demonstrate not only the ubiquity of poetry in daily life but also the active involvement of ordinary Americans in the reception and even creation of such campaigns. Focusing on the long-lived billboard campaigns for Burma-Vita shaving cream, Chasar makes a compelling case for the impact of popular verse on practices ranging from children's games to high modernist prose. Additionally, he draws on this material to recontextualize debates within the literary elite, from Pound's references to "advertising [...] for a new soap" in "A Few Don'ts By an Imagiste" to the billboard aesthetic of post-modernist poetry (126).

He substantiates these claims in two case studies of the interchanges between poetry and popular culture that make up the concluding chapters of the book. Chapter four considers William Carlos Williams's poetics in relation to the language of roadside advertising he would have encountered on the way to his house calls. In a series of striking

analogies, the chapter demonstrates that the critical potential of contextual readings is far from exhausted and that such readings can capture both the intricacies of complex literary texts and their entanglements in the perceptual patterns of modern consumer culture. Chapter five examines the work of Paul Engle, founder of the Iowa Writers Workshop and prolific supplier of verse for Hallmark gift cards, for its mediation between elite and popular poetics. The similarity of Engle's greeting-card verse to the scrapbook poems discussed in chapter one reveals how Chasar's approach has shifted in the course of the book: instead of preconceived ideological notions, he now relies on traditional close readings to valorize his material and makes a benevolent case for the formal complexity of Engle's poetry. The chapter develops a useful perspective on the gradual differentiation of the poetry landscape into high-brow and low-brow during the mid-twentieth century. Its concluding observations on the persistence of popular poetry in the present day summarize the main tenets of Chasar's argument and at the same time testify to the qualities that make his study such profitable reading: his willingness to look beyond the conventional field of analysis, his ability to trace connections between seemingly disparate phenomena, and a compelling enthusiasm for the subject that carries author and reader alike through the uncharted territory explored by this important study.

Augsburg

Timo Müller