

KORNELIA FREITAG and BRIAN REED, *Modern American Poetry: Points of Access*. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), xii + 236.

What do Terry Eagleton and Marjorie Perloff have in common? As the introduction by Kornelia Freitag and Brian Reed points out, both scholars deplore students' unwillingness to attend to the linguistic specificities of poetry. Instead, they tend to offer "bizarre" (7) (Perloff) opinions about the supposed meaning of poems without engaging with questions of form. Implicit in Eagleton and Perloff is the assumption that this was different in the past, therefore one might well ask: "What has happened?" (8). This is not the question the introduction addresses, though. Instead, it tackles the slightly different question why there has been a steady increase in publications concerned with the teaching of poetry ever since the 1920s. The rise of creative writing programs, the decline of the New Criticism and its appreciation of formal analysis, the marginalization of poetry within American Literature, the rise of approaches that stress cultural conditions such as feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory are a somewhat contradictory array of factors: Why are there more and more books on teaching poetry if it is deemed less important to teach? Perhaps it has been deemed increasingly difficult to teach? Somewhere in the introduction's depiction of developments in the literary and educational fields, there lurks the suspicion that perhaps these pedagogical books have not been very effective: either teachers have not managed to convey the skills considered missing, or students do not care and prefer their own approaches anyways.

The good news is that there is a vibrant interest in American poetry, both in terms of production and in terms of reception. And, as the eleven contributors to the book testify, there are scholars and teachers who believe that they can provide points of access to poetry including an engagement with form and language. Their contributions are listed chronologically according to the poetry they discuss, beginning with Lisa Simon's "Teaching War Poetry: A Dialogue Between the Grit and the Glory," which briefly discusses an excerpt from Joel Barlow's "Columbiad", and ending with Martina Pfeiler's article on Slam Poetry. There are different ways of grouping these texts—the introduction distinguishes between three essays on single poets (Dickinson, Stein, O'Hara), three essays on groups of writers (Imagists, Confessional Poets, Indian-American Poets), and four essays reporting directly on teaching experiences and sharing didactic insights. For the purposes of a critical discussion, however, it seems appropriate to ask what the contributors consider as advisable access points and how they suggest using them.

There is, for instance, the didactic question as to whether one begins with the poems themselves, whether one approaches them through historical context, or whether one begins with their present reverberations, working one's way backwards. Reading Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Susanne Rohr demands "a thorough contextualization" (60), which she provides through biographical information and a section on "the upheavals of Modernism" (61). In a similar fashion, Wolfgang Wicht contextualizes some Imagist poems, only in his case the context is provided by poetological statements found in letters, anthologies, or magazine articles. Heinz Ickstadt provides a compelling variation of the contextual approach in that he sketches the situation of an avant-garde in general ("In times of artistic upheaval, when conventions are questioned, traditions re-examined, and literary or artistic institution perceived as bastions of the Old, the forces of rebellion tend to cooperate and interact," 115), and then zooms in, focusing on poetry and painting, on Frank O'Hara, and on the texts themselves. There are a lot of poems, quoted in full in this article, and given the trajectory from context into the specific texture of O'Hara's poetry one could, perhaps, foresee Ickstadt's final turn—namely to free O'Hara from being an embodiment of a period and a place (the New York School) and move towards an appreciation of the richness and inventiveness of his texts.

It is probably no coincidence that the articles dealing, at least in part, with nineteenth century poetry advocate an approach that includes the students' present, their preoccupations, and their media. Lisa Simon, who obviously speaks from experience, recommends a discussion of the military sublime in poems such as "The Columbiad" together with contemporary movies and other visual depictions of war. Students should be given room to discuss what might be 'positive' or fascinating about war before they confront poems debunking common idealizations—Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces*, for instance. In a similar fashion, Sabine Sielke proposes to read Emily Dickinson simultaneously in her nineteenth century context and contemporaneously as she is mediated in contemporary popular culture. The former is achieved through biographical information, the latter through material such as movies, exhibitions, dramatic adaptations, and cartoons, which take up Dickinson and turn her into a sort of icon.

Some essays suggest confronting students directly with poems and making them do something with it. Brian Reed, for instance, proceeds inductively by starting a unit on confessional poetry

with Robert Lowell's "Waking in the Blue." His goal is to show the uselessness of "the real/fake binary" (102) of the autobiographical voice, the difficulty to distinguish between artful and artless self-expression—something that will prepare students for postmodern poetry. His method is to reveal the artistry that makes the poem dramatic, almost operatic, and this includes spelling out the detailed knowledge of Boston Lowell assumes his audience to have. Actually, the article is close to arguing that students reading Lowell today will not even have to be weaned from a mistaken notion of confessional poetry as direct, sincere, and 'raw' confession: that impression was a historical effect, a combination of the contrast to the artifice of high modernism (such as Eliot's poetry) and the stigma still attached to all kinds of mental disturbances and therapies. David Huntsperger approaches postmodern poetry and the question of form by encouraging students to understand form as productive and a matter of choice rather than as a given constraint. Here, teachers may learn from creative writing workshops and their exercises; the task of rewriting someone else's poem, for instance—and figuring out what this could mean—is one way of illuminating the entanglement of form and content and make students experience it. In a similar vein, Walter Grünzweig and Julia Sattler demonstrate through examples how translation offers an efficient point of access that forces students to attend to linguistic details.

The article on collectively translating June Jordan's poetry by Grünzweig and Sattler is followed by Freitag's contribution on contemporary Indian-American poetry and this juxtaposition facilitates some interesting questions about the knowledge and skills we should bring to the various poems: both Jordan and the Indian-American writers discussed by Freitag are considered as American transnational poets. Does that mean the same in each case? Is it a consequence of this view that it seems we need not know much about African American literature and culture or India to translate and interpret the poems? Or do the passages about "my name" (171) in Jordan's "Kissing God Goodbye" resonate differently when considering the sensitivity to the power of naming as a heritage of slavery—though this has no bearing on the translation? For reading the poems of the Chicago-born poet Srikanth Reddy, it definitely helps to recognize the intertextual allusions to Thoreau, Kipling, and Plato—this kind of transnational poetry gestures towards world literature and situates itself, as Freitag argues, at the "crossroads of cultures" (175).

The last essay in the volume, Martina Pfeiler's "No Rules But in Schools?: Teaching and Learning from Slam Poetry" brings together American culture with a global popular scene and, in

a new variation, questions about the relation between formal analysis and cultural knowledge. For one might be tempted to think that, as with lyrics, the texts of slam poetry performances do not lend themselves easily to close readings and might require a different approach, but the essay convincingly argues otherwise. An irritating moment in this essay, that yet proves this point, is the paragraph on Emmett Till, which confuses Mississippi with Alabama and, more importantly, gives the questionable testimony from Carolyn Bryant, the wife of the accused, as a reason for his murder as if this was the fact and truth of the matter. Interestingly enough, the crucial lines in the poem are ambiguous with regard to the commitment of the speaker to the reason of the murder: “Like what dripped from Emmet [sic] Till’s lip when he was killed / from [sic] breaking down color lines” (203). The ambiguity arises from the phrase “breaking down color lines,” which is usually an appreciation of what activists were trying to do. The poem thus turns Emmett Till into a martyr of the civil rights movement and history into myth—and the lines of the poem demonstrate how important it is to let formal analysis and historical contextualization complement each other. Given the current interest in the German ‘Englischedidaktik,’ a book offering “Points of Access” to poetry in schools and universities is certainly very welcome and timely; when these points come from a firm disciplinary background in literary studies these access points may demonstrate the relevance of careful reading as well as a simultaneous openness to contemporary issues in cultural studies.

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