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Daniel Morris. 2013. *Lyric Encounters: Essays on American Poetry from Lazarus and Frost to Ortiz Cofer and Alexie*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. ix + 225 pp. ISBN: 978-1-441-11017-6.

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Lyric Encounters: Essays on American Poetry from Lazarus and Frost to Ortiz Cofer and Alexie is a collection of single-authored essays that challenges traditional readings of the lyric form as either soliloquy, intrapersonal communication or monologic discourse. Morris organises his book chronologically, devoting each chapter to the interplay of particular characters, artwork or texts to create a dialogue between them. Consequently, the collection benefits from an interdisciplinary approach to poetic interpretation, such that the contextualisation of poems is effected through visual art, music and prose genres as well as other poems. The lack of formal coherence between pairings—Langston Hughes's "Theme for English B" (1951) and its pedagogical implications, William Carlos Williams's "The Crimson Cyclamen" (1936) and Charles Demuth's eponymous watercolour (1917-1918), Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" (1883) and Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Latin Deli" (1993)—may seem elusive, despite the fact that the intermedial connection of the poems to other discourses is carefully thought out, thus enriching the critical analysis of the texts.

The introduction challenges the lyric as monological discourse. For Morris, it is not a "short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker" (Kennedy and Gioia 2009, 10) nor "the genre of private life" (Vendler 2002, xl), but rather a "social genre" (1) as it strives to make "persons acknowledgeable" to each other (Grossman 1992, 3). If the lyric is read as the monadic expression of a self, the potential neglect of interpersonal aspects can deface the interpretation of the poem. Opposing this approach, the author aims to interpret poems within a wider textual framework. As an example, when comparing Sherman Alexie's understanding of the interpersonal in a poem, Morris intersects it with other texts—including verse, but also novels and articles—in order to historicise and make a case for a dialogic interpretation of the text. Thus, the *lyric encounters* in the title refer to "poems that represent dialogues between a lyric speaker […] and another character," but also to "the encounter between lyric poetry and other texts" (4). However valid this approach may be, the book misapprehends close reading

as necessarily restrictive; unjustifiably, Morris misconstrues interpreters such as Helen Vendler as being narrow-minded. While she has been a master of close reading with British Romanticism (Vendler 1980) and early American Modernism (Vendler 1969), she has proved her versatility when combining textual interpretation of poets such as T. S. Eliot, Allen Gingsberg, Louise Glück, Seamus Heaney and John Ashbery with their coeval art, music and politics (Vendler 1983, 1998, 2005). Morris's tirade against close reading as a limited practice, in any case, renders itself moot as he exploits close reading within his contextualised readings in order to expose the interpersonal within the poems under scrutiny.

In the second chapter, Morris exemplifies the subversive power of irony that he claims works against interpreting poems as the expression of a single self. Langston Hughes's "Theme for English B" (1951) dramatises the misunderstanding between an unruly but brilliant student and an insensitive teacher upon the latter's assignment to "go home and write a page tonight" (13). In free verse form, Hughes "uses irony and subversive humor to challenge the teacher's assumptions" (15) about what self, home and truth mean to the black, underclass student. Aptly, Morris outlines the problem of identification of the lyric voice with a universal speaker, which he contrasts with John Keats's "When I have fears I may cease to be" (1818) to show how Hughes uses "resistant reading strategies to deconstruct universal notions of lyric subjectivity" (15). Morris, however, fails to notice here that these notions are received and, particularly because of the canonical weight of Romanticism in English poetry, belong to a tradition. It may be conceded that the lyric has been perceived as subjective in Western literature, but this is far from universal. Furthermore, more modern theoretical approaches to the lyric—Altieri (2006), Aviram (2001), Perloff (2002)—have broadened our concept of the lyric genre beyond monologism, a fact which is overlooked by Morris in his discussion.

Chapter three outlines the creative encounter between William Carlos Williams's poetry and Precisionist pictorial art, in such a way that Charles Demuth's deconstructive ways in the watercolour Cyclamen (1917-1918) are echoed in the eponymous poem by Williams. For Morris, these "differences between seeing […] and actively creating" make the poem become a "transgressive or queer poetic act" (7). He details how formalist approaches have missed the opportunity to go beyond stylistic comment, suggesting a "queer approach" for the interpretation of a poem, "a reading that challenges existentialist ideas about a person's identity as a sexual being with a fixed gender" (29). Morris asserts that formalist readings work "to distance, remove, conceal, or cool down" (30) the poem's rendering of a passionate encounter between flowers—but this needs not be the case. Nevertheless, Morris manages to unearth hidden codes to allude to Demuth's homosexuality from Williams's rendition of the watercolour. In doing so, he makes a successful transition from text to painting that illuminates both.

The fourth chapter traces the dialogue in Allen Ginsberg's "America" (1956) between poetry and mass culture which, set against the poet's ambivalent response to his

commoditisation, foregrounds his contradictory self-fashioning as both countercultural and mainstream figure. For Morris, the poem responds to the containment of the Cold War, even though it manages to "deconstruct Cold War discourse—conservative mainstream/radical progressive—on a deep structural level" (43). Ginsberg "occupies multiple positions," thus "turning the monologic lyric genre into a zany dialogue" (43) between poetic voices, from the "countercultural critique" of the opening stanzas to the "Cold War paranoia" (45). Reading the poem alongside Theodor Adorno's premise of modern "culture industry" to produce a "thoroughly calculated efficacy in its most typical products" (Adorno 1975, 13), he readily conceives Ginsberg to announce "his alternative masculinity" (47). Morris overinterprets the poet here, making it difficult to reconcile such an assertion of masculinity with the fact that Ginsberg's lukewarm responses make him "in the end ambiguous and contradictory" (66) towards his personal stance. Ginsberg's performance of combined masculinity and queerness in the 1950s, and its evolution, has been chronicled and examined more successfully in other texts (Penner 2011).

Chapter five sets Emma Lazarus's classic sonnet, "The New Colossus" (1883), which reifies the Statue of Liberty as the unofficial greeter of incoming immigrants, against Judith Ortiz Cofer's rendition of Miss Liberty—the owner of a Latin-American Deli that caters for exiles longing for the tastes and smells of their culture— in "The Latin Deli" (1993). The dialogues with her "unassimilated, and often dissatisfied customers" (68) transcend the binary situation—us/them—in Lazarus's poem to present a much bleaker and complicated reality. Although the patroness represents "mother tongue and the motherland" she "sells products that fail to deliver the promise of a fulfilling return to the original space" (75), which Morris extends to "represent the relationship [...] between a poet and a reader" (76). On a figurative level, the poem represents a prospect that is ultimately marred: no culture can be fully replicated outside its ecosystem. The thematic coherence of both texts ensures the success of Morris's method in this case, and despite no direct intertextual relation being offered, it reveals itself to be as poignant as it is intriguing.

The sixth chapter is devoted to jazz music, and it explores the interaction between John Coltrane's improvisations and the collage aesthetics of Michael S. Harper's poetry. Morris interprets Harper's tactics as a means to sublimate queer lust, arguing that the "age-old verbal-visual controversy" entails "a veiled expression of queer desire" (8). The author explains how Harper's "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" (1970) exemplifies the way in which the poet "collapses paradoxically contrary elements such as space and time, history and myth, love lyric and elegy" (83) to mimic the sound of jazz music. This accurate point could have been applied to other poems or poets, but Morris prefers being more elusive and biographical to support his queer reading. With the last years of Coltrane's life as a background, he goes on to explore "homosocial and socially disruptive aspects of queerness" (83) in the desexualisation of the poems. In doing so, he exposes Harper's "ekphrastic fear" of fusing "artistic homage" with the "worship

of the (sick) body" of a dying Coltrane (97). As with Ginsberg, in the end the poet is seen as suspect to heteronormative subjection—which risks being more an instance of presentism than an accurate interpretation on Morris's part.

Chapter seven delves into the materials of Frank Bidart's "Ellen West" (1990) to indicate how the passages taken from the medical case notes of a suicidal Swiss Jewish woman—anorexia nervosa and other possible mental illness—were heavily edited by the poet in order to avoid the internalisation of anti-Semitic discourse. The depictions of her body hatred and the prevalence of Aryan physical values on the part of the reporter resonate when Bidart tries to construct Ellen West as a historical figure. For the author, the poem is "at least triply mediated" and therefore "heteroglossic" in Bakhtinian terms (106). Its palimpsestic nature is exposed by the ideological qualms on the part of "Bidart's dramatization" so that it "extends the reach of lyric subjectivity," answering the "concomitant critique levelled against it as a solipsistic genre" (131). In doing so, Morris manages to foreground the role of ethical implications in the creation of a new artistic discourse based on a historical interpretation of the past.

Chapter eight continues exploring this interplay of individual history and poetry. It traces the real-life correspondence between the Native-American poet Leslie Marmon Silko and the white Midwestern poet James Wright. Morris shows how both agree that creation serves primarily as the translation of authorial voice into poetic artefacts. He stresses how, for Silko, stories within poems reflect not only personal but communal experiences. Wright's "poetry of mourning [...] for despicable persons" (141) such as murderers and political incompetents can be better understood in dialogue with Silko's conception of "a correspondence between collective representation and personal identification" (150), since poetic discourse transcends the individual voice which originates it. A piece of instructive research on the real-life contact between two very dissimilar poets, the chapter succeeds in illuminating the interpretation of Wright's poems separate from their formal innovation.

The ninth chapter is the longest in the collection. It argues the misapprehension of the "interpersonal, multicultural, and gendered tensions" (3) that animate poems like Sherman Alexie's "On the Amtrak from Boston to New York" (1993) by formalist interpreters who primarily read poems as closed artefacts, deceivingly giving Helen Vendler's reading of the poem as an example (2002, 246-251). Morris, nevertheless, makes his case for a contextualised reading of earlier poetry in light of his detailed interpretation of Alexie's writings after the 9/11 attacks. If previously interpreted as participating in "a terrorist imagination of the United States as an Evil Empire" (156), the poem is later able to be acknowledged as a much more nuanced and complex thought on favouring "multiculturalism over tribalism [...] or individual identity as incorporating, and transcending, simplistic nationalisms" (199), which sheds new light on this much-discussed text.

The conclusion briefly eschews a personal reflection on Frost's "Mending Wall" as the potential catalyst for the author's own contribution to the Judaic notion of *tikkun*

olam ['world mending']. Morris explains how Frost's "symbolic event of wall-mending" allows the speakers "to discuss fundamental values" (203-204). In interpreting Frost's poem as a negotiation, Morris makes a case for a cultural interpretative field that is set, like his readings in the book, within "dialogical cultural practice" (206). It follows that his method can be further extended and applied to other authors successfully, despite Morris being quite modest in this respect.

The collection, nonetheless, has a strong pedagogical tendency; not only because Morris acknowledges that the essays in the book stem from his teaching, but also because the explications of the poems are very detailed and culturally contextualised. His poem selection is wide-ranging and, as is the case with any miscellany, questionable: Gary Snyder, John Ashbery, Adrienne Rich, Mark Doty or Julia Spahr would also fit there. Morris's use of theory is more problematic: he avoids extended commentary on formal concepts—like Shklovsky's defamiliarisation or Bakhtin's dialogism—and overlooks key texts and modern discussions. Furthermore, he is inconsistent in his queer-theory reading of the poems, despite these sharing the disruption of "dominant and hegemonic discourses" (Johnson and Henderson 2005, 5). His reading through debunking tactics fails to notice the institutionalisation of his own approach, and he misses recent conceptualisations about the lyric which establish a tradition of the interpersonal within the genre that dates back to Romanticism (Hurley and O'Neill 2012; Thain 2013). These establish Romantic poetry as creating dialogic discourses, dispelling author claims that Alexies's "On the Amtrak" (1993) "re-enters the Romantic Lyric mode" in a way that the poem "is bent on resisting how the speaker imagines the world" (5). Furthermore, Morris goes here against the premise of his own book: a lyrical poem cannot choose to work as either explicit or implicit communication. After the uses of the lyric within Romanticism, poems are invariably communicative acts when read, discussed and analysed. Despite these minor shortcomings, which may render his interpretation as subjective and partial, Morris explicates poems profusely and accurately, and the dialogic nature of poetry is put forward and developed pertinently. Though not equally relevant in every case-poem—and sometimes with an overimposition of queer analysis—he illustrates a valid way of interpretation which deserves to be explored further in other poems.

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