

BOOK REVIEWS

Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing Through the Catastrophe. By Richard J. Lane. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2005. 224 pages. \$24.95 US.

For the last several decades the intellectual figure of Walter Benjamin has achieved an iconic status across multiple disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In his new book, *Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing Through the Catastrophe*, Richard J. Lane argues that Benjamin's thought performs a complex chiasmatic approach that crosses the sacred and the profane in a critical operation that does not subsume one within the other. This contrapuntal approach, Lane argues, keeps Benjamin's theological motifs alive while continually crossing the antithetical critical domains crucial to Benjamin's notoriously critical and complex body of work. Providing a preliminary sketch of key background material in the early chapters, Lane offers an overview of some of Benjamin's key motifs, including *Kulturpessimismus*, Gustav Wyneken, Surrealism, Goethe and Kant. In the final chapters, Lane extrapolates from his observations on Benjamin, applying these insights to specific examples in contemporary art and literature. Lane specifically selects the contemporary visual artist Rachel Whiteread and the novelist B.S. Johnson as examples of how his reading of Benjamin lays bare new insights into the relationship of the arts with Benjamin's underlying chiasmatic approach to the sacred and the profane. However, as interesting as these particular examples are overall, I found myself frustrated by the results.

While the effort to transpose Benjamin's critical approach to the examination of a contemporary writer and a visual artist is welcome, I found Lane's approach limited. The selection of Whiteread and Johnson is both too narrow in focus on the one hand and too broad on the other, in the sense that I would have wanted to see a wider application of Benjamin's thought to the arts or, alternatively, a more in-depth engagement with the artists that Lane selected. Other recent publications on Benjamin provide better examples of both approaches; for example, the multiple layering of art and theology is adroitly unpacked in the recent book by S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (Manchester UP, 2005), while the application of Benjamin's thought for contemporary literature receives an excellent critical overview, particularly on the question of Benjamin's helpfulness in analyzing literature from a queer perspective, in Dianne Chisholm's *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (U of Minnesota P, 2005). Even the book's jacket cover claim for its appeal to a non-specialist audience (in addition to more advanced areas of scholarship), has been pre-empted by several recent publications that provide, I would argue, clearer and more helpful introductions to Benjamin, including Graeme Gilloch's *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Polity Press, 2002) and Esther Leslie's *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (Pluto Press, 2000). In conclusion, Lane's book contains some very valuable content and observations, but I would direct non-specialist

readers to the above mentioned texts before having them read Lane's problematic but still interesting and useful analysis.

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Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T.S. Eliot. Edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 265 pages. \$75.00 US.

Setting out to explore the interplay of homoeroticism, gender constructions and other neglected aspects of T.S. Eliot's modernism, Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish's essay collection shakes up what was a somewhat stuffy literary conversation. Until quite recently, Eliot as the static Modernist Patriarch has been an image difficult to dislodge from the collective imagination as difficult, one might argue, as the established meta-narratives of a uniform modernism. In this collection, contributors cover new ground in Eliot scholarship by delving into the social and cultural context of Eliot's time, while keeping a firm eye on the aesthetic implications of individual works. This approach to Eliot is one whose time has come; as Colleen Lamos quips in her analysis of homoeroticism in Eliot's early poetry, today's readers exist in post-elegiac relationship to his work. If we accept that we no longer cower in what Cynthia Ozick calls Eliot's literary shadow, it is more vital than ever to revisit his work with the new perspectives constructed in part by recent criticism in the fields of queer theory, feminism and cultural studies.

These essays exploit current re-imaginings of modernity and yield new insight into Eliot's significance in literary history. Using a range of primary sources and theories, these writers question Eliot's reputation as a stodgy, conservative, misogynist figure in the (purportedly) reactionary club known as the Moderns. They interrogate the complexities and nuances of his acknowledged weaknesses; for example, Lamos asks, how precisely did homophobia function in his poetics and was this repression in some ways productive? Can we reposition Eliot as an innovator wrestling with the challenging contradictions of his time? While consistently strong throughout, certain essays stand out, including Gail McDonald's convincing account of the connection between Eliot's reception history and the fluctuating status of female academics. Charles Altieri's work on emotion in Eliot's poetics is so lucid and methodical it suggests a whole new way of talking about affect in literature, in some ways demanding a book of its own.

While successfully gathering multiple fresh perspectives on the dynamic and complex modernity of Eliot, this essay collection also offers the reader a remarkably thorough account of the trajectory of Eliot criticism. Laity's introduction makes great reading for even the emerging Eliot scholar with its detailed history of modernist studies of Eliot, acknowledging the important work of recent scholars (such as Lawrence Rainey, Marjorie Perloff and Andreas Huyssen) who have brought a renewed energy to aesthetic discussions while reconsidering traditional understandings of the period, including the influence of popular culture and the treatment of women by the modernists. As Laity notes, the more we consider the contradictions and multiplicities inherent in the modern, the more fragile and shifty the border with the postmodern becomes.

This survey of Eliot criticism makes a useful stage for the subsequent essays, which attempt to both build upon its foundation and dismantle the initial structure itself. If this metaphor suggests a precarious enterprise, it is no accident. As is often the case, in an effort to expose the oversimplification of traditional perspectives on modernism, earlier readings tend themselves to be flattened. For example, Michele Tepper begins her discussion of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" with a dismissal of earlier studies that, she claims, fail to actually *read* the work and only question its subsequent readings. In a rush to excavate new critical territory, it can be all too easy to debase the readings that have come before.

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