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A Poetry Criticism Reader

Jan Weissmiller, editor
Jerry Harp, editor
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Poet Robin Becker might call this book a fine example of “literary citizenship,” in which poets and critics alike contribute to the contemporary, exigent discussion of the discipline. In this collection, some of the strongest citizens speak about poetry, its movements and some of its most beloved and bewildering practitioners in a series of essays meant to enlighten, inform, and intrigue readers prepared to enter the fray.

The editors (Weissmiller is a graduate from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and a buyer at the Prairie Lights Bookstore; Harp is a visiting assistant professor of English at Lewis and Clark College) gathered eleven essays ranging in topics from ruminations on Eliot’s legacy to the emergence of what Stephen Burt calls “the elliptical poets.” The contributors (Burt, Jorie Graham, James Harms, Lyn Heijinian, Mark Jarman, Donald Justice, Dennis O’Driscoll, Helen Vendler, Karen Volkman, Joshua Weiner and Stephen Yenser) all write in the poet/scholar tradition made famous by T.S. Eliot.

Justice, Harms, and Jarman mimic the fine close readings of poet/scholar Randall Jarrell, whose essays, like these, were known for their accessibility and enthusiasm. The essays, on music in poetry, on James Tate, on three Justice poems, have the humor and warmth of a very knowledgeable friend ushering the reader into a new world.

Vendler, a renowned critic and Harvard professor, introduces Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner, Czeslaw Milosz and his poem, *A Treatise on Poetry* as translated by Robert Hass. She argues that the importance of this poem may rival that of *The Wasteland*, a pronouncement that she backs up with carefully detailed, and painstakingly organized evidence. Heijinian attempts to formulate a statement of poetics and Volkman rediscovers Lorine Niedecker. As a whole, the book engages questions regarding postmodernism and its reality in poetry.

Editor Harp writes: “postmodernists sing among the ruins of the past, incorporating these ruins into their performance without attempting to form them into something coherently monumental. In fact, part of what postmodern writers tend to find enabling is the very fragmentation of the ruins. Fragments make for more portable property to incorporate into one’s world.” It is fitting then that the essays approach the topic from multiple viewpoints and voices.

In Harp’s introductory essay, he asserts his hope to continue the series, and that would be a service to poets, teachers, and general readers alike. Mostly unencumbered by theoretical nomenclature, these essays are accessible to an educated lay audience and relevant for people already conversant in the discipline.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (February 8, 2007)

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