Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory since the Renaissance
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Reviews

Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory since the Renaissance. By Emerson R. Marks. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998. 413 pp. $44.95 cloth, $21.95 paper.

To those who came of age in the profession of English before the rise of the New Historicism, cultural studies, queer studies, and performance theory and before the deregulation of the English curriculum, Emerson R. Marks's history of poetic theory will appear to rehearse matters of perhaps oppressive familiarity. By contrast, those who have joined the profession since then are unlikely ever to take notice of his unabashedly traditional account. This imbalanced communicative situation may itself warrant analysis, inasmuch as it points to a profession at risk of sliding from pluralism into particularism and, eventually, into solipsism. Unperturbed by its own, at best tenuous, sense of an audience, however, *Taming the Chaos* opens by promising us, "for the first time" no less, a review "of four centuries of commentary by writers in English on the nature of poetic language" (11). Marks's account is undeniably the fruit and summation of a long career of teaching and research. If only at a low analytic threshold, he delivers a basic, and as such unobjectionable, survey of theories ranging from Puttenham and neo-Aristotelianism in the Renaissance to T. S. Eliot's holistic view of poetic diction, aesthetic cognition, and the role of the canon. The usual issues are all touched on: the struggle over the aesthetic dignity of the English language during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, neoclassicism's struggles with the rational and ornamental aspects of meter and rhyme, the tension between self-privileging emotionalism and verbal technique in Wordsworth and some of his contemporaries, the usurpation of formal poetics by the prosaic mid-Victorian world, and so on.

Yet that the book's chapters should feel so excessively familiar (again, to those with some experience in the profession) cannot be simply attributed to the particular cohesiveness of an English tradition of poetic theory.

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Rather, this familiarity reflects Marks's deep conviction that traditions, by their very nature, are calculated to obliterate significant interpretive differences. To be sure, taking the long view does not keep Marks from pointedly expressing his displeasure with "the facile dogma urged by some recent modish theorizers" (12). Yet the presumptive infallibility of the tradition to which he is so devoted excuses him from any explicit and probing analysis of the actual claims of structuralist and poststructuralist theories. In his (Burkean) understanding of tradition, we may well encounter individual differences of interpretation and evaluation, and "personal bias and cultural conditioning" are likely to affect "even the most informed and perceptive analyst" (12). Yet in the end "those distortions are minimized by the constant corrective of the divergent views he is forced to contemplate, many of them incorporating the mind-set of earlier ages. Though each historian approaches his task with certain evaluative convictions, they are seldom to any appreciable extent of his idiosyncratic devising" (12). Thus Marks's ambitious review of "four centuries of recorded opinion on [the] notorious thorny critical issue" of literary language aims to capitalize both on the quantitative weight of tradition and on its supposed ability to distill an average value or "consensus" from the flux of individual opinion (13).

Yet by arraying "the Pauline cloud of witnesses whose testimony constitutes the subject of this book" against the "adherents of [a] literary egalitarianism" (13), Marks surrenders direct analytic engagement with the arguments about literature's supposedly special status. The result is a book whose aspirations remain mostly encyclopedic and whose claims prove, with few exceptions, thoroughly conventional. The cast of characters is predictably rich, covering all the major voices (Sidney, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot) as well as a vast array of minor writers. Yet as Marks's rhetoric of faith suggests, they are assembled solely to bear witness to a tradition whose meaning is presumed to be beyond dispute. As the title suggests, *Taming the Chaos* has been written in the spirit of Coleridge's and Eliot's deep resistance to the democratic, diverse, and disputatious nature of modernity.

This book asks no complex questions, forges no new lines of interpretation, and entertains few arguments. It simply retells what the author deems the invariant story of poetry as an autonomous and quasi-sacred pursuit by tabulating "the common experience of readers throughout history" (167). Indeed, not only does Marks appear persuaded of the uniformity and truth of that experience, but he also seems entirely unconcerned about the connection between his own writing and the discourse on poetry over the past fifteen years or so. Thus the recent, widespread shift of literary study toward broadly historicist forms of inquiry remains wholly unacknowledged. Marks's indifference to this sweeping development in his epilogue no longer comes as a surprise, given his by now familiar claim that the formal-aesthetic

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tradition of poetic theory evolved in utter independence from any particular economic, moral, and cultural transformation. To be sure, the distinction between formal-linguistic qualities and sociopolitical issues seems perfectly sensible—not only within the serene weltanschauung of the New Criticism. Yet Marks goes much farther, effectively denying that these two realms can ever enter into a meaningful relation. Consequently, the role of the critic as it emerges from this book is shrunken to that of the epigone, bibliographer, custodian, and, indeed, eulogist of an all-powerful tradition. It is an uncomfortable position to inhabit, and it cannot come as a surprise that Marks's affirmation of four hundred years of poetic theory is occasionally suffused with Nietzschean ressentiment. For that tradition, as he constructs it for himself above all, appears so self-sufficient as to leave a critic like him with little to do while, perversely, commanding little attention from almost anyone else.

Still, the epilogue's survey of poetic theory after the New Criticism yields an informed, if not exactly subtle, account of the roots of American deconstruction in French and Prague structuralism, Russian formalism, and phenomenological criticism. One may deplore Marks's often crude vocabulary, such as when he lays the responsibility for the "current disorder" at the feet of a "Gallic poststructuralism" whose decision to route all cognitive pursuits through a linguistic model Marks finds particularly troubling in the case of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Pierre [*sic*] Lacan (333, index). Marks seems altogether unaware, however, that his disparagement of a supposedly French-imported "stylistic egalitarianism" places him under an even greater obligation to justify his own core values, which are hardly less linguistic in kind and which he adumbrates, rather offhandedly, as "poetic ontology" (178). Just what this term encompasses and to what extent it can ever be advanced from an object of faith to one of intersubjective understanding are questions to which *Taming the Chaos* provides no answers. But then, what can one expect from a book premised on the belief in poetry as a "language . . . apart from all other kinds of speech or writing" (13)?

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Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem. By Robert Kern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xiii + 316 pp. $59.95.

In *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* Robert Kern explores American and European approaches to Chinese language and literature during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they have influenced American poetry and poetics. Kern shows that the work of twentieth-century poets

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