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REFERENCES


1 Given how ineffective any one form of protest may be, Astrid Franke in the opening of her book wonders “how could the presumably least public literary genre...be dangerous...to those holding power in a democracy?” 1. Franke takes as her point of departure the rhetorical strategies of the age of the American Independence and concludes with a critical discussion of the radically altered interface between the public and the private spheres in the wake of 9/11; throughout, Franke explores how “aesthetic innovation and public commitment” are “intertwined” (5), and offers attentive readings of poems that revolve tensions between the personal and the collective, as well as between private and shared histories.

2 In the introduction, Franke argues for the relevance of John Dewey’s pragmatist theorisation of the public as “part of a political process that has its origin in the consequences of conjoined human interaction and is aimed at social action” (9); Dewey’s emphasis on the singular, contingent and contextual character of the public constitutes the backdrop against which Franke examines how poets and poems engage historical and social experience and reality: the notion of the public does not only point to a study of reception and/or intended audiences but also to the complex mediations whereby historical and social reality is shared and collective; it is through an engaged awareness of those mediations that Franke critically discusses the public function of poetry.

3 The first chapter “Melancholy Muse and Public Man: Phillis Wheatley and Philip Freneau” examines how poetry begins to address a “democracy” that was essentially “conceived...as a cultural project that artists should contribute to” (22). Freneau and
Wheatley in Franke’s study emerge as poets who were driven by an “attitude of public obligation” (1), creating a poetry that foregrounded “the relation between the poet and the new (re-)public” (5) as essential for the development of an American literary culture. Franke subtly revisits how politics and religion are intertwined in Wheatley’s projection onto an ideal(ised) public–to–come. Fashioning herself as an “afric muse” and bending the trope of melancholy, Wheatley took on a “self-empowering role” in order “to face a transatlantic public” (56) that consisted in contending groups. Problematising her position as representative of a public that was anything but unified, her poetry seemed precisely devoted to setting ideals and values in order to bridge but also to acknowledge differences. While Wheatley attempts to reconcile the religious and the secular, Freneau, Franke explains, revolves a tension between reason and the affect, seeking to bring emotion in a “social order” where it was actually considered a threat (63). America becomes Freneau’s pastoral, the Indians its native “noble race” and “mythical past” (64) and, “understands as well as Wheatley the particular appeal of mournful melancholy to the politically disenfranchised” (65). Franke traces a shift in Freneau from the rather tame and idealised projection onto the new republic to advocating the revolutionary project and the ideological agenda of westward expansion, as he adopts more popular and populist discourses away from the classical and neoclassical tropes that would have appealed exclusively to his peers of an educated class. Freneau, Franke argues, occupies a more uncertain ground than Wheatley, as “neither can he see himself as a common man, nor can he find a social group which can convincingly be presented as new model citizens” (87).

The second chapter “The Poet as Role Model: Henry Longfellow and Walt Whitman,” moves onto two iconic figures who fashioned themselves as “exemplary personae” (89). Franke examines how Longfellow dramatises the confrontation between personal values and the moral law in a culture where systems of belief are in crisis. Longfellow’s inability to engage the paradoxes of his own poetic and moral project—notably in the way he mounts an indictment of slavery in order to promote American democratic ideals—is a “failure that is not personal but cultural” (104). Franke shows how Longfellow ultimately defuses the violence of his era for the sake of morality and plain speaking, while Whitman, rather than seeing the “controlling, containing and balancing public passions” as an antidote to the “violence lurking in the heart of America,” sought to “integrate” this passion “violent or erotic, in his poetic vision of a truly public self” (105). Franke interestingly revisits the imprint of the Civil War on Whitman’s poetic sensibility and public ethos in order to retrace Whitman’s “change in attitude towards the public prompted by a diminishing belief in America’s ability to balance and contain man’s internal forces of destruction” (121). Whitman, Franke goes on to show, bends accepted codes of morality through “two public gestures: the pathos of identification and the search for a truly public language” (122). Franke explores how both Longfellow and Whitman expose the (im)possibility of being and becoming ‘public’ and the (im)possibility of writing for a heterogeneous public in nineteenth-century America. Both seem to move from the anticipation of an ideal to the public trauma of the divisiveness that persisted after the war.

In the third chapter “Forming the Public: Public Poetry between Vachel Lindsay and T. S. Eliot,” Franke invites us to read both Eliot and Lindsay differently: arguing that their “poetic radicalism highlights certain aspects of the pragmatist conceptualisation of the public by pushing them to an extreme” (152), Franke examines how they revolve both a generalised and abstract, as well as a singular and contingent notion of the public.
Lindsay aestheticises the masses, and attempts to redefine Whitman’s inclusivity; he conflates populism and democracy, and fashions himself as the representative figure, putting imagination in the service of a projected “thorough transformation of social life” (157). Seeking a shared ground between Lindsay’s nativist populism and Eliot’s “performing mind” (161), Franke stresses how both were concerned with connecting poetic form and social experience, yet unlike Lindsay, Eliot disassociates morality from form. Franke frames her reading of Eliot and Lindsay with a discussion of a ‘middle ground’ occupied by Carlos Williams and Muriel Rukeyser (165) who invite participation, yet also express anxiety over the public role of both poet and poem. Williams, Franke, argues, voiced concern about the role of the artist in shaping symbols since his early work. While Williams attempts to locate the poet, as it were, within a project that sought to alter the audiences’ consciousness and at the same time suggest ways for a poet to immerse his/herself in social life, in the Book of the Dead, Muriel Rykeyser employed modernist form in order to expose how social reality is constructed as consensual.

In the fourth chapter too, “Spiritual Historians: Robert Lowell and Robert Hayden,” Franke goes against the grain of established ways of reading the two poets and revisits how their work emerges at a moment when any one idea of a democratic public seems to have fallen apart. In this chapter, Franke discusses how Lowell expresses his anxiety about participation and detachment in an alienating public sphere through poems that “come to convey the psychological states of individuals directly facing and resisting the machinations of an impersonal worldwide political set-up courting global disaster” (196). In Franke’s discussion of Lowell, it transpires that both the poet and the public are not only politically but also emotionally disenfranchised. Franke relocates Lowell on the map of post-war American poetry as a ‘white man watching’ (197), a contemporary disillusioned visionary whose poetry enacts a form of self-knowledge as a public trope. Franke throughout pursues the tension between public causes and personal despair and argues that only when Lowell’s ‘suffering’ is “inseparable from the public world,” “the public becomes a stage for the eternal ironies of history” (215). In counterpoint to Lowell, Franke approaches Robert Hayden as a “black man watching”; she reads Hayden’s ‘Monet’s Waterlilies’ as a redemptive project about the transformative power of art. While Hayden “develops an impersonal stance” and resists “the role of spokesman” (220), in his poem, the act of seeing becomes embodied and politicised through memory. Casting himself in the guise of an observer-participant, Hayden becomes an ‘ironic historian,’ a late modernist who responds to the imperative to publicly appropriate and share a silenced yet ‘public history.’

In her last chapter “Poet.org,” Franke raises important questions about the efficacy and the expressive power of both poetry and activism in the wake of 9/11, as the stakes of political involvement re-emerge before the waning of the role of individual agency. Poetry about the event and its aftermath is often avowedly public, intent on remobilising poetry as a collective force, and symptomatic of a self-conscious relation with the public. Franke discusses how poems that were included in Sam Hammill’s collection Poets Against the War, (re-)envision their (re-)publics, while thematising their own belatedness and inappropriateness even. Poetry in the wake of 9/11 is marked by the inability to articulate, as poems often seem to involve a double bind whereby they either seem to be replicating the discourses that they condemn, or advocate a self-evident morality that is ultimately disempowering. Franke offers readings of poems where the realisation of impotence is not the conclusion but the point of departure for
public poetry; as Franke puts it, “it is perhaps because people experience themselves less and less as creative agents in the public realm that they seek this experience in and through art” (247). Franke records the difficulty to sustain cohesive notions “of individual and nation” (256), and the hope that new possibilities for public poetry might emerge as poets realise that “concern for others as a precondition for any notion of public is to be rooted in an experience that is tied to abstract ideas” (257).

Throughout her study, Franke raises important questions about a poem’s embeddedness in society, history and politics, through a subtle examination of the mediations between the poet and his/her publics; mediations that involve the difficult question of agency. In her introduction, Franke turns to Dewey and Adorno in order to construct a theoretical frame for readings that stress the need to concurrently think the social and the aesthetic. Franke states her intent to produce readings that point beyond the “the epistemological problem Dewey advanced,” and this is why she sets out to examine “the relation of the discursive sphere to agency and social change” (14); in like manner, her analysis of how the powerlessness of poetry may become empowering is resonant with Adorno’s complex views on aesthetic autonomy and the truth-content of the work of art. In a collection that recently revisited Adorno’s aesthetic theory, Robert Kaufman writes that “what’s operative in poetry after ‘poetry after Auschwitz’ proves to be extraordinarily hard-won recognition of actual, specific historical developments and conditions of possibility that would go largely, if not completely unapprehended but for artistic-aesthetic–in this case, poetic–agency, effort, and achievement.” 1 Although a more extensive engagement with Dewey and Adorno might have led to interesting insights into the paradoxes of what it means to become public, Franke’s timely genealogical exploration of “problems of public poetry in America” is in resonance with a revisionism that seeks new ways of re-envisioning aesthetics and politics: Franke’s book compellingly revisits the connection between poetry and the world, and sets renewed paradigms for reading poetry as an essentially public event.

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