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Elizabeth Gregory

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Quotation and Modern American Poetry: "Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads."
By Elizabeth Gregory. Houston: Rice Univ. Press. 1996. viii, 238 pp. Cloth, \$37.50; paper, \$16.95.

Elizabeth Gregory demonstrates how modern American poets transformed cultural belatedness into a figure of the feminine as a process of shoring hierarchies (T. S. Eliot), of ambivalent dehierarchization (William Carlos Williams), and of flexible hierarchization (Marianne Moore). Eliot's quotations in *The Waste Land* enact a revisionary authority that nevertheless maintains strict evaluative distinctions between cultural codings of the masculine and feminine; Williams turns to quotation in *Paterson* to blur Eliot's distinctions, if only to hesitate at the blurring. Moore's situation is more complex, as outlined by Gregory's readings of selected poems in which Moore echoes and revises her Miltonic influences. In Moore's responses to Milton, quotation becomes the "principal instrument" for the construction of a maternal authority that "refuses a stable pattern of domination by one role or gender over another while continuing strongly invested in some authority and its exercise" (140–41).

Gregory's discussion of the historical background that inspired the modernist move from allusion to quotation focuses on how modernist quotation combined "nostalgia with forward looking" (3). Both nostalgia and forward looking are crucial to what she terms Eliot's "quotation plot" in *The Waste Land*, an oedipalized narrative trail of quotation that borrows from paternal poetic precursors and represses its maternal precursors to create an "attenuated originality" (65). From this attenuation, Eliot embraces national and literary secondariness while reaffirming paternal, oedipal authority. Despite Williams's attempts to "unrepress the feminine" in *Paterson*, his mode of quotation represents a "continuation of his nostalgic impulse even as he disclaims it" (75). Williams's incorporation of letters from younger writers in *Paterson* reinvokes the authority Williams otherwise seems committed to revising. Quotations from these writers "establish him in the same position of authority over them that he refuses to others over himself" (126).

Gregory's most energetic work is with Moore; this is understandable, insofar as Moore's response to problems of authority and secondariness embraces an ambidextrousness Eliot and Williams repress. The discussion of Moore's use of quotation is deft, demonstrating how her reading of Milton influenced her tendencies toward both relativism and hierarchization. In Moore's poetry, cultural secondariness "is expanded to include actual femininity along with the fact that she is a modern and an American" (184). The conflicts between gender identity and cultural authority inform poems such as "In the Days of Prismatic Color," "An Octopus," and "Marriage," where quotation creates "the means for speaking without seeming to," thereby "redefining as authoritative what had been considered secondary" (154).

Gregory enlivens the strategic implications of quotation, reevaluating the

ways textual collage was deployed to differing, often contradictory ends by modern American poets. Her emphasis on the cultural implications of American modernist quotation is especially valuable for readers interested in questions of periodization and Anglo-American literary relations. By deepening our sense of modernism's usable past, Gregory offers a structure for understanding how modern American poets risked silence by identifying themselves with secondariness, and how they transformed this risk into a strategy "that hinders to succeed" (185).

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Private Poets, Worldly Acts: Public and Private History in Contemporary American Poetry. By Kevin Stein. Athens: Ohio Univ. Press. 1996. xv, 190 pp. \$37.95.

In this study Stein explores nine American poets—Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, John O'Hara, James Wright, Phillip Levine, Yusef Komunyakaa, Rita Dove, David Wojahn, and Carolyn Forché—locating in the work of each the dynamic interplay of history and poetry, of the political and the personal. Much recent poetry provides, Stein argues, a “lively and redemptive alternative” to modernist insularity; rising from and redressing the hermetic, apolitical work of early to midcentury poets, it “operates in the intersection of private and public history,” welcoming its “social function.” Thus Lowell finds in himself and his vulnerabilities emblems of American ills, while Rich deploys her “historical inscription” as woman as fuel for radical action, both in art and life. Wright and Levine reveal both sides of the beleaguered-blue-collar-laborer coin, Wright ever at odds with himself—thanks to success—for outgrowing his “outsider” roots, Levine mostly aligned with his roots, if haunted by the much-present past. Komunyakaa reflects on black Americanness against the continuing nightmare of the Vietnam War; Dove also reflects on black America, though in various settings and unmoored in historical time, seeing in the “frenetic fleeing of one moment into another . . . history as lives in motion.” And Forché—most prominent among “political” poets—“mutes lines that distinguish between ethical, moral, aesthetic, and political matters,” invoking not only the voices of the lost and oppressed but our “shared history” as well.

Interweaving close reading, social and cultural history, biography, literary theory, and philosophy (notably, Gadamer, Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger), Stein utilizes “sensible critical, theoretical, and cultural sources,” hoping to create a “humane practical criticism”—which he does, refreshingly. His discussion is lucid, comprehensive, incisive, and informed; his chapters on Lowell and Rich, Wright, Levine, and Forché are especially insightful. The connections he makes between individual poets are, in nearly all cases, striking. If at times he seems to stretch his thematic net—steering us into last century’s Sioux Wars, say, or into the biography of Wright’s football-star