
BOOK REVIEWS

Emerson R. Marks. *Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory Since the Renaissance*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998. 416p.

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Judging literary criticism to be “the most humane of intellectual pursuits” (21), Emerson R. Marks (with stunning critical intelligence, historical knowledge, and discursive charm) describes, translates, and appraises in *Taming the Chaos* some four centuries of potent commentary on perhaps the wickedest thorn in the brambles of English literary theory: what is poetic language? The roots of Marks’ surpassing inquiry into opinion on poetic diction (and ineluctably on much more) lie in his earlier books on English poetics: *Relativist and Absolutist* (1955), *The Poetics of Reason* (1968), and *Coleridge on the Language of Verse* (1971). Like these exceptional works, *Taming the Chaos*—its title inspired by Coleridge’s vision of poets as “Gods of Love who tame the Chaos”—is a discriminating and dramatic interplay of history, theory, and criticism. Copious notes and a proper index back the unobtrusive citations in this *magnum opus* by Marks, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and former editor of the distinguished journal *Criticism*.

Between Introduction and Epilogue, fifteen packed chapters on the periods and leading poeticians run chronologically. In addition to unifying his intellectual narrative with deft anticipations and recapitulations, Marks compares perdurable motifs and enriches the whole movement from the Renaissance to Postmodernism with cogent allusions to classical and modern Western theory. In prose piquantly concise he elucidates the merits and shortcomings of the various stances. His measure of Neoclassical Formalism, Romantic Organicism, and Modernist Neo-Coleridgeanism moves him to devote two chapters each to Neoclassicism, Coleridge, and Eliot, with Coleridge as the crucial pivot. Alive to the intersubjectivity of the critical enterprise—with all its attendant confusions and contradictions—Marks tactfully suffers no pronouncements (old or new, authoritative or provisional, traditional or subversive) to tamper with the evidence of the poetry and the poetics under the disinterested investigation of his own literary sensibility and critical acumen.

Taming the Chaos would evade simple summary in a long critique, let alone in a short review. Still, one is moved to note that Tudor notions of poetic diction rose out of arguments about the stability of English as a poetic medium. Elizabethan adulation for the rediscovered ancients both helped and hindered the progress of poetics. As a result of Classics-into-English and English-into-Masterpieces, most poet-critics praised the medium as fit—insofar as *any* vernacular is amenable to literary creation. Indeed, questions on poetic diction (as well as on meter, rhyme, rhythm, and the poetry-prose distinction) followed. Unlike the Greeks and Romans, the Elizabethans felt verse to be more valuable than prose. At various times words in poems were likened to gems ... colors ... attire ... flesh. Before Coleridge, Samuel Daniel saw rhyme as salutary for mastering the “unformed chaos” of the imagination. Viewed as a barbaric device after the fall of Rome, rhyme nevertheless triumphed over English quantitative verse—thanks less to philosophical inducement than to reader enjoyment. Proponents of Neoclassical clarity, intensity, propriety, and elegance eschewed the vagaries of actual talk. Still, rationalism and empiricism blurred the life-art distinction. The source of a reader’s pleasure, stylistic Dryden insisted, is verbal artistry, particularly word choice and meter. In Pope’s world of non-organic unity some ideas simply were too trivial to communicate and some words too “low” for poetry.

Nicely illuminating the extent of Romantic dictional upheaval, Marks compares passages from Thompson and Wordsworth. Bringing eighteenth-century “aesthetic pastoralism” into his flawed theory, Wordsworth advocated a poetic utterance plain and passionate, the idiom of rustics over the consciously literary diction of Neoclassical cosmopolites. Unlike his predecessors, Wordsworth (a better poet than poetician) insisted on the substantial identity of poetic and non-poetic language. Marks rightly argues that language by its very nature is stereotyped, especially the “plain” and “easy.” Furthermore, revision or the second phase of composition is not of itself unnatural, insincere, or artificial, for Marks points out that in creating high art the mutual exclusivity of “natural” and “artificial” is highly problematic. At Wordsworth’s “refusal to allow meter a place among the emotive data tranquilly recollected during the creative process” (120), Marks confesses puzzlement. Though highly formalized meter may well be a latter-day “superaddition,” the origin of poetry was the beat, beat, beat of the primeval tomtom.

As the cornerstone of Coleridge’s brilliant reformulation of past poetic doctrine, Marks names neither the opposites-reconciling imagination nor the poem-poetry distinction, but rather the subordination of expressionism to “a fundamental mimetic orientation which includes and transcends it” (125). Marks indefatigably

sifts through the major source-hunters. For Coleridge, representational fidelity “is subject to a prior and overriding requirement of intrinsic structural coherence” (127). Poetic imitation—no vicarious substitute or repellent copy of actual experience (as Wordsworth’s theory holds)—is *sui generis*. Still, Coleridge had as much faith in poetry’s cognitive value as he had in prose’s emotive. “Few problems of literary theory,” Marks continues, “are more elusive than those encountered in differentiating prose from verse” (148). Byron, Shelley, and Keats rejected Wordsworth’s conflation of the two, for they perceived poetic words to be the “stuff of an art, a medium manipulated to create something more compelling than anything else produced by the use of language” (170).

Moral, social, and historical issues during Queen Victoria’s reign predominated questions of style and structure. Among subjects that Marks pulls out of the “quagmires of verse theory” (175) are Leigh Hunt’s deployment of Coleridge’s “dynamic organicism,” De Quincey’s close reading of metrical lines, and Carlyle’s “hieroglyphics.” For Arnold, who felt moral-cognitive influences from “the consummate felicity in diction” (197), verse was superior to prose in “power” and distinct from it in “style.” Through inference, Marks tries to close the gaps in Arnold’s thinking. His celebrated “touchstones”—often decried for sacrificing aesthetic wholes to detached parts—Marks sees as Arnold’s pragmatic way of uplifting public taste and schooling men and women on “how to tap the deepest well-springs of [poetry’s] consolatory and sustaining power” (205). Assuming that Arnold’s grand-style excerpts reflect more than a personal taste for “high seriousness,” Marks can assent to Arnold’s at least grounding his judgements on the—again—“linguistic stuff of which verse is made” (204). With Pater, Swinburne, and Wilde, the aesthetic dominated the moral and intellectual. A “sincere” prose belletrist because lexically faithful to his “unique” psyche, Pater delicately “endorsed Wordsworth’s dictional naturalism and stylistic equation of verse and prose, along with the attendant depreciation of meter” (220). Swinburne, Wilde, and Hopkins did not. Language, Marks reminds us, is a social institution; a truly unique Paterian expression would be incommunicable.

In the first phase of the twentieth-century debate—“one of theoretical rumination” (263)—critics by and large restated Romantic organicism’s amendments to Neoclassical deficiencies. Treating insights of Lascelles Abercrombie, Owen Barfield, and A.C. Bradley, Marks also offers established opinions “graphically encapsulated in one or another arresting figure” (264). To gifted poets distressed by outworn poetic diction, T.E. Hulme preached objectivity—a diction hard, dry, and precise—as well as the abandonment of regular meter and syntax. Seeing no necessary incompatibility between Hulme’s hard diction and Coleridge’s dynamic

organicism, Marks demonstrates that in several ways Yeats, Pound, and Eliot advanced Coleridge's ideas. Marks names the medium-conscious Eliot as Coleridge's "genuine theoretical heir," for pervading the poet's critical essays is "the intuition of a formal order sustained by opposing impulses" (287). Eliot also sensed the deeper significance, the "revelatory potential" (328), of metrical language. Both Keats the Romantic and Eliot the Modernist testify to "an ultra-lexical order of aesthetic communication" (328). Unlike Wordsworth, Eliot in his "forays across 'frontiers of consciousness'" (321) sensed the mysterious and unparaphrasable meaning inherent in poetry's primitive drumbeat. Marks clarifies Eliot's telling idea that a word's music rises out of crossed colorations—one from the other words in its immediate context, the other from meanings and associations of the word in other contexts. In the "musical" possibilities of Shakespeare's dramatic verse, Eliot envisioned "one of the most daring conceptions of poetic language ever proposed" (329).

Unlike Enlightenment Know-It-Alls and Postmodern Know-Nothings, Marks resides firmly in the camp of the Know-Somethings. Though he cannot espouse poststructural excesses—Derrida's deconstructive hermeneutics, nihilism, the death of aesthetics, the author, referentiality, and the rest—Marks in his Epilogue neither ignores nor distorts its innovations, as do some of its strongest supporters, both English and American. Of particular interest are Marks' insights into Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, celebrators of poetic expressionism, "repelled by the dehumanizing tendencies of poststructuralism" (350). While literary ideas become ever more subtle, poetic language remains a mystery. This paradox tantalizes not only poetry-lovers but egalitarian textualists who yearn to conflate under the same linguistic laws the poetry of John Keats and the patter of John Doe. During the great Anglophone debate, most disputants, Marks notes emphatically, sensed "that in poetry language is employed in a manner, and with an effect, that sets it apart from all other kinds of speech or writing" (13). That no theory has ever captured fully poetry's "unique essence" or the reader's experience of its "wondrous ways" is for Marks axiomatic. To feel poetry's "magic," however, in no way "relegates to an exercise in futility the centuries of effort to discover, and to formulate in rational terms, the means by which that power is activated" (21). *Taming the Chaos* is a masterpiece of evaluative history, the refined real thing that quickens the serious student once again to the discipline, beauty, and worth of literary scholarship—itsself no mean tamer of the chaos. ✱