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contemporary women's poetry and urban space: experimental cities

Zoë Skoulding, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, 2013, 234pp., ISBN: 978-0-230-29278-9, \$100.00 (Hbk)

From the start, poet and scholar Zoë Skoulding aims to set the record straight. In Part I of her book, she writes in order to correct the male-dominated *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* by Peter Berry, in which Berry (2000, p. 21) speculates that women tend not to use urban toponyms in their poetry and that they may 'feel less confident' of 'ownership' that naming of public places implies. Skoulding's examples, drawn from poetry by UK poets Emily Critchley, Denise Riley, Marianne Morris and Carol Watts, as well as Juliana Spahr (USA), prove her point that 'it is not that women are insufficiently confident to name the city, but that naming of any kind can be a form of complicity with those who have the power to name' (p. 25). Given the lack of critical literature on the subject of women poets and the city, Skoulding's contribution is an indispensable one.

In Part II: 'Vision, Power and Knowledge', Skoulding writes about US expatriate poets Alice Notely (France) and Lisa Samuels (New Zealand) who grapple with the need to dismantle the labyrinth of patriarchal/capitalist power relations, although they are fully aware of the lack of a reliable map. Skoulding argues that Notely, who writes about New York and Paris, exposes the limits of simple refusal and advocates for a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which large cities reflect globalised human civilisation. According to Skoulding, Samuels also raises our awareness of the new urban paradigms, but with a focus on the conundrum of 'how to read the unreadable' text of the body and the unnamed, indefinite city (p. 82).

Part III: 'Language and Locality' discusses Geraldine Monk and Ágnes Lehóczky, poets who bring into focus the polyphony of the English language: Monk remixes Anglo-Saxon place names and the accents spoken in Northern English cities, and Lehóczky deals with her own bilingualism as she navigates Babel-like European cities. Skoulding argues that, in the context of experimental women's poetry that plays with multiple speakers and pronouns, Lehóczky re-establishes the unified (if nomadic) lyric 'I' and 'reframes possibilities for lyric poetry' (p. 125). Overall, Skoulding contrasts Monk's use of the past and present of a national history and Lehóczky's exploration of her personal history as a poet who grew up speaking Hungarian, but who writes in English.

Skoulding devotes Part IV: 'Polis' to Erín Moure and Lisa Robertson, poets with Canadian roots or connections. Like most of the poets Skoulding analyses, Moure and Robertson construct nomadic personae traversing geographies and interrogating concepts of citizenship and exile. Moure's Montreal, as reimagined in her books *Search Procedures* (1996) and *O Ciudadán* (2002), is 'a site of

resistance and regeneration in a global context' (Skoulding, 2013, p. 151). Robertson's work spans not just geographical locations (from Vancouver to Paris) but also generic conventions, and her critical essays, poems and sound recordings illuminate one another. For Skoulding, Robertson's (2003) book *Other Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* captures the city as it transforms under the direct influence of global capitalism, which the peripatetic speaker resists by recording minute surface details around her.

The poets that Skoulding considers in Part V: 'Acts of Attention' are not isolated figures paired up *post factum*; they already form alliances. Skoulding argues that the first group, composed of British poets Redell Olsen and Frances Presley and American poet Jena Osman, uses intertextuality without parody in order to demonstrate how 'quotation is a form of reproduction in which the reader or viewer takes control of the work or art, pushing it to political ends by writing back to it' (p. 178). Skoulding ends the book by considering the power of poetry as performed for urban audiences in person or as part of hypertexts in the works of Fiona Templeton, Hazel Smith, Laura Elrick and Kaia Sand. In an open-ended conclusion, she posits that 'the performativity of gender cannot be separated from the physical performances that produce space' (p. 211).

A WorldCat search for books on the subjects of 'cities and towns in literature' and 'twenty-first century' yields about sixty relevant results in various languages, which is not bad for a century that is barely in its teens. However, add 'women authors' to the search, and we're down to a single result aside from Skoulding's book, and that would be *Unfolding the City: Women Write the City in Latin America*, a volume on fiction authors of the past 200 years, edited by Lambright and Guerrero (2006). As Skoulding demonstrates in her book, this scarcity is not because of a lack of city-inspired poetry. Focussing on contemporary Anglophone poets, Skoulding unravels a network of about twenty women born between 1945 and 1981, who reimagine lyric and experimental modes in order to put into poetic practice a lived experience of power relations on the street level, underground and in high-rises of capital and governance. Skoulding's work is both unprecedented and necessary; I can easily imagine college courses devoted to the study of contemporary experimental poetics, anchored by *Contemporary Women's Poetry and Urban Spaces: Experimental Cities*.

references

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