

In this, Sethi stops short of advancing her documentation of Rao's literary and political maneuverings to questions of authorial and critical self-positioning. A theory of historicity seems implicit in the book, often opposed to fictionality and invoked through comparisons between "ideological" and "material," or "ideological" and "dramatic"; however, that theory is unable to interpret the overlaps and the crises of identity that the intersection of these terms necessarily compels.

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Eleanor Cook. *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1998. Pp. xiv, 318. \$39.50.

Eleanor Cook argues that poems are "serious games" (xi) that "proceed by indirection" (xii) and that these "indirections speak to our entire lives" (xi). For Cook, the rhetorical game of poetry is so serious that it is nothing short of a war waged against coercion. The amalgam of play and war is not unfamiliar to readers of her earlier book, *Poetry, Word-Play and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*. Focusing primarily on twentieth-century poetry and culture, Cook portrays the poet as a figure of unexhausted power: the poet "has been there already, has thought of x, has felt y, has observed z, and will thereby direct the reader further" (xiii). As appealing as the image of powerful poets may be, one cannot help but think that Cook is more convinced of their cultural power than they themselves were. It is hard not to think of Stevens's anxiety respecting his "positively lady-like" (L 180) habit of poetry-making and Ammons's relief to find that his testicles are (thank God!) still there after he has been sitting around for hours typing a long poem on (of all things!) an adding-machine tape. Still Cook's argument is compelling and impeccably defended throughout. She enthusiastically exhibits the power of poetic language to liberate us, personally and nationally.

In the nineteen essays that constitute the volume, the poetry of Eliot, Stevens, Bishop, Wordsworth, and Milton, to name the principal players in the grand game of poetry-making, is subjected to the rigor of Cook's method of "putting pressure on a poem" (xiii). And she is anything but guilty of hyperbole when, in the *Foreword*, she informs

the reader that such formalistic readings require "hard work" (xiii). This is not a book for the intellectually flabby. Each essay packs a pedagogical punch and one has to be on one's toes to stay in this game.

On the level of the individual essay, the volume is most effective. Cook's tireless intellectual exertion invariably "yields something" (xiii) memorable, such as the insight she brings to the "carrier-warrior-pigeon" in Bishop's "*Paris, 7 A.M.*," the punning play of "*gryphus/gryphus (riddle/griffin)*" in Aristotle, Dante, and Carroll, and the significance to the modern world of the loss of the verb "methought" as once used by the likes of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth. Whether Cook is subjecting a word to close etymological scrutiny or to the broad scope of its usage in poetic history, these "exercise[s] in expiication" (45) challenge and satisfy the reader. Particularly enjoyable is her "Stevens speak": she has so perfectly absorbed his voice that one cannot read Cook on the act of "unseeing" (93), art forms and "survival" (84), or pressing back against reality (xiii) for instance, without hearing echoes from Wallace Stevens's *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*.

The volume as a whole, read start to finish, is less satisfying, however. A tenuous linkage exists between the essays, despite efforts taken to structure the book into four parts: "Empire, War, Nation" (the power of poetry in the lives of empires and nations); "Culture and the Uses of Memory: Allusion" (the role of allusion and cultural remembering/forgetting); "Poetry at Play" (the serious game of punning, riddling, and other word-play); and "Practice" (the art of practical criticism). The stubborn independence of the essays no doubt stems from the fact that fourteen of the nineteen essays were published separately prior to being recollected under one cover. Altogether the essays were published over a span of nineteen years (the earliest appeared in print in 1979). An editorial oversight contributes further to this impression of structural weakness: I refer here to the unfortunate repetition in chapters eight and thirteen of the "intertextual wordplay" (192) between Stevens's "obscurer selvages" from *Esthétique du mal* and Eliot's "The Dry Salvages" from *Four Quartets*. The game was, simply, much less fun the second time around. Lastly, Cook confuses the reader by incorporating two chapters on Faulkner's fiction and Canadian fictive prose in this study which is subtitled "Games Poets Play."

A related difficulty emerges with respect to the determination of the volume's audience. Described on the dust jacket as a "study in advanced poetics" and concluding with a pedagogical chapter on teaching poetry, *Against Coercion* appears to be directed to the graduate student or the university teacher of English literature. Typically adopting the voice of the teacher/mentor, Cook encourages and inspires us to keep pace with her as she undertakes her academic

exercises, which delightfully emerge as a kind of refresher course for those of us who may have grown lazy or careless in the trenches of the undergraduate classroom. I say "typically" because there are occasions when her tone flattens to a weary irritability with her readers: "[n]o one asks, but I became curious" (47) or "[t]he quotation marks *apparently* need explaining" (51; emphasis added). At such moments, the voice of a tired, fed-up boot camp leader comes to mind, for how can one fight a war against coercion when one is too lazy to exercise intellectual integrity? This is not to say that academics do not need such a shaming now and again, perhaps. Even her pity for what she considers today's poorly educated academics comes back to embarrass university educators: "when I read increasingly clumsy, ill-informed remarks about formal effects, my heart goes out to the writer . . . who has been deprived of decent training in the great verbal traditions of the art of poetry" (4). On other occasions, though, Cook seems to have a strictly undergraduate audience in mind, and this confusion contributes to an impression of unevenness in the volume.

Certainly any undergraduate reader patient enough to work through these elaborately wrought essays would be brought to an appreciation of the importance of curiosity with respect to the play of language that we find in poetry and the world as well as of practical criticism well practised. If this is her intended audience, it is understandable that she would provide translations for quotations in foreign languages (although inconsistently) and even define the acronym PLMA (in this chapter on Canadian literature, surely she is not sceptical of her fellow Canadian academics's knowledge of this source?). But if written for the undergraduate, why conclude with a chapter on teaching? And if written for graduate students and English literature professors, the "obvious yet perhaps startling" conclusion that "good poetry requires thinking" and "thinking matters" (257) is stale.

While it may be ambiguous as to whom Cook is addressing in this book, one thing is not lacking in clarity: to be better readers of poets's games and to be ourselves better players at the game of literary criticism, she has much to teach all of us. Professor Cook's fascination with poetry and her tireless exploration into the life and power of words inspire the book and her readers.

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