Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990. By Jed Rasula

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Rasula. Urbana: NCTE P, 1995.

Rasula presents a "documentary and polemic" aimed at revealing how "can-
onizing assumptions (and compulsions)" have flattened the field of American
poetry and narrowed its goals to the "enshrinement of the self-expressive
subject" (4). The operations of publishers, the academy, and movements
within poetry itself work together to comodify aesthetic experience and to
create a poetic monoculture; these operations are justified by appeals to a
nonexistent "general reader." Rasula claims that these institutions thus func-
tion as what Tony Bennett would call in his study of museum systems an
"exhibitionary complex," with the exception that this complex has a fascina-
tion for what Rasula calls "the return of the *expressed*," the repetition of fa-
miliar forms and themes that provides, quoting from Adorno's *Aesthetic
Theory* " the illusion of intelligibility" (12, 10). Rasula therefore dubs this
complex *The American Poetry Wax Museum.* The polemical content of
Rasula's book can therefore be summarized as saying that these organiza-
tions, willy nilly, practice a politics of the center, the beneficiary of which is
"the solitary white male" (415).

      The documentary portion of Rasula's work relies upon an analysis
of the apotheosis of New Criticism and its "antithetical" "emphasis on for-
malism, Christianity, and regionalism" as well as of the controversy sur-
rounding the nomination of Pound for the Bollingen Prize in 1948, to argue
that the rise of a "sociological" attitude toward literature in the 1950s was an
outgrowth of a new "managerial temperament" which transformed American
poetry in the ensuing decades into a series of cults of personality centered
around Auden, then Lowell, and finally culminating in a conflict between the
raw poetry of the Beats and the cooked poetry of the New Formalists (85,
122). Rasula concludes that the "[American] poetry world is now configured
by four zones" which are "[u]tterly disproportionate in terms of size, material
resources, and internal stability": the Associated Writing Programs, the New
Formalists, the language poets, and various groups of identity-based poetic
communities (440). These four "zones" are presented as outgrowths of a
single interest—what to do with the rupture initiated by Modernism—that
can be localized in two intentions: to either close this rupture by emphasizing
craft and form or to expand it by emphasizing poetics, which in turn encloses
"method, polemic, religious dicta, and social critique" (441).

      Rasula begins his conclusion by proposing a new word,
canontology, that "has to do with sanctioned prescriptions for . . . *styles of
belonging*" and by claiming that both Confessional Poets and the Beats,
though lying on opposite sides of the formalism/poetics dispute, tended to
court canontology (471). Finally, Rasula claims that what is lost in such dis-
putes is "the audacity of Whitman's attempt to make a canon all by himself,
sensing in the center cause for bereavement" and reminds his reader that,
quoting Williams, "[t]he local is the only thing that is universal" (483). *The*

American Poetry Wax Museum's application of Bennett's exhibitionary complex is a useful companion and corrective to monolithic works like David Perkins's two-volume *A History of Modern Poetry* and it is a clear statement of some of the aesthetic and political concerns informing the works of such poets as Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, and Nathaniel Mackey.

J. P. Craig

Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary. Perloff, Marjorie. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder* explores the ladder metaphor in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (postulate #6.54)—

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who under-
> stands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he
> has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He
> must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has
> climbed up on it.)

—- as the basis of a "distinctively Wittgensteinian poetics" whose characteristics include an emphasis on linguistic "*dailyness*," a suspicion of "*theory* itself as an imposition on *practice*," and a belief in iterative "difference" in which "[r]epetition . . . always entails a shift in context as well as in use" (xiv). Perloff claims that passages in Wittgenstein's notebooks and other writings that appear tautologous, like "The world of the happy is a *happy world*," amount to a "foregrounding of syntactic difference [that] is closer to avant-garde writing than to the style of [Russell's] *The Principia Mathematica*" (44). Instead the "sudden break, the lack of connection, between two kinds of operation" constitutes a "uniquely Wittgensteinian" writing practice that contains a "note of irresolution" which belies the claims of those like Adorno who see Wittgenstein's famous aphorism—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"—as little more than a "gesture of reverent authoritarian authenticity" (12). Perloff claims that this is instead a "commonsense recognition that there are metaphysical and ethical aporias that no discussion . . . can fully rationalize" (12). She later links the apparition of these aporias in Wittgenstein's writing practices to the *dailyness* mentioned above through Victor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization:

> Wittgenstein's ordinary is best understood as quite simply
> that which is, the language we do actually use when we
> communicate with one another. In this sense, the ordinary
> need not be literal, denotative, propositional, neutral, refer-
> ential . . . . On the contrary, our actual language may well
> be connotative, metaphoric, fantastic, the issue being quite