

Benjamin Bennett. *The Defective Art of Poetry: Sappho to Yeats*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. x, 208 p. ISBN 9781137381873. £53.50 (hardcover).

Benjamin Bennett's book traces a line, as its subtitle suggests, from Sappho to Yeats, as if to encompass most of the Western European lyric tradition. Its eight chapters discuss a dozen or so poems *in extenso* and allude to a handful of others as supporting evidence.

Several of the poems Bennett discusses — Sappho's invocation to Aphrodite, Goethe's "Über allen Gipfeln," Verlaine's "Chanson d'automne" — have been held up by one critic or another as examples of perfection. All the exhibits are short: from a few dozen to perhaps three hundred words. With so few moving parts, a reader might expect that little could go wrong. Many poetry addicts will possess several of these poems in memory, and thus be in a position to evaluate their integrity of design. With such examples before us, how can Bennett brand poetry with what the law would call inherent vice or latent defect?

In its simplest form, the problem around which Bennett builds his case studies is "the basic defect of poetry—that poetry, in the age of the printed book, always invokes a quasi-musical immediacy and communicativeness that it can never actually deliver" (123; see also p. 2). A reminiscence of music survives in our conventions for reading, writing, and printing poetry (e.g., line breaks and the right-hand margin), but these signs usually amount to no more than relics of a former time. Returning poetry to its home in music is one of the recurrent utopias of Western culture, recognizable through such dissimilar events as the founding of opera in the age of Monteverdi and the prophecies of a future materialistic poetry of action in Rimbaud's "Lettre du voyant." But Bennett's interest is not in restoration. It is rather in what the defect produces.

The absence of melody, a defender may say, merely prompts the compensatory supplement of additional charges of meaning in the words, degrees of meaning which singing might but poorly transmit: necessity proving the mother of invention. Thus lyric's inadequacy as music is its advantage as language and thought. This counter-argument is one Bennett has already considered, but apparently found too simple and symmetrical. Bennett's purpose is not to set up a norm, even less to demolish one. It is simply to follow the consequences of poetry's originating imperfection through some exemplarily brief, taut, and affecting poems.

The book starts out — puzzlingly or dialectically — with the negation of a negation, a move that makes more sense on second reading. Facing "the silencing opposition between passion and poetic form," Sappho stands out for "her insistence on the problem as a problem, her

refusal to back away from it, her implacable laying bare of a fundamental defect in the very idea of a passionate poetry” (30). For in Sappho’s “Poikilothron” ode, where the lover’s disappointment is shown turning into a call for revenge, there is for Bennett “no gap between the immediate kinesis of passion and the unfolding of language. And precisely the absence of such a gap, I contend, is in Sappho’s practice the aim of poetry, the reason for poetry.”(22) Like Michael Riffaterre or Paul de Man, Bennett is a reader who scrutinizes the mimetic surfaces of poems for tell-tale gaps, inconsistencies, impossibilities, and from these draws clues about the ultimate sources of the poem. It is absurd for Goethe to have said so baldly “Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde,” for in a forest the main way to know whether birds are there or not is to listen for them singing—not “being silent.” The slight failure to make sense tips us off, however, to a more consequential structure of perception and awareness that wraps around the poem itself as linguistic event, as “hieroglyph” (49). This is obviously not New Critical reading for totality and autonomy, nor is it a biographical reading that would seek to reestablish the transparency of an original experience. It is reading for incoherence—but not the way an enemy of poetry would perform it; rather, the way a Socratic friend of poems might sidle up and through questioning make them uncomfortably self-aware.

Each chapter trains the reader to recognize new forms of the enabling “defect.” The chapter on “Hyperions Schicksalslied” carries out an intense and subtle questioning of practically every affirmation made in that poem, along with the slightest details of its meter, leading to a recognition of “the opposition between the poem as artifact and the poem as action.... Hölderlin ... uses [this] basic defectiveness of poetic form to signify a truth concerning the relation between kinetic reading and intellectual reading, and hence a truth concerning the relation between fate as experience and the knowledge of fate” (101). The chapter on Verlaine’s “Chanson d’automne” (“Les sanglots longs / Des violons / De l’automne...”) derives powerful metapoetic arguments from what sounds to some ears like mere melancholy humming. The chapter on the use of Mörike’s “Auf eine Lampe” as a speaking platform by Heidegger, Staiger, and Spitzer reserves a fine surprise: that none of the poem’s interpreters have noticed how deftly it undercuts their own pretensions to hermeneutic authority, founded on their claims to have read the poem conclusively. The late poem “Lapis Lazuli” by Yeats proposes that we look on present-day political crisis with the “ancient, glittering eyes” of two carved Chinese on a chunk of semi-precious stone. Wisdom? Rather a preparation for the

point that “both poetry and politics, when conducted properly, involve the acceptance of a radical, irreparable defect in themselves.... What the two endeavors have in common is in truth nothing but defect” (183).

The book’s continuous argument occurs through the repeated discovery of an indispensable flaw in the poem’s authority to affirm, to prophesy or to make beautiful. The recurrence of a single motif as the pivot of these various readings may suggest an atemporal poetic. But careful reading revises that impression. Bennett is conscious of differences in the historical situations of the successive poets. He could perhaps have brought out their specific conditions of utterance a little more without seeming to endorse a thorough-going ideology of “context” as the background that obviates argument. It does seem to this reviewer, for example, that the dream of a poem as action (quickly set on a collision course with the ideal of a poem as form) is a Romantic invention, the conditions for its emergence set by poetry’s unsure place among the media of a democratizing age.

Poetry deserves such subtle, relentless and inventive readers as Bennett. His respect for the art is not in the least discomfited by such arguments as de Man’s, that “the lyric is not a genre, but one name among several to designate the defensive motion of the understanding, the possibility of a future hermeneutics” (“Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], 261). The critique can be admitted without defensiveness. Lyrics like those discussed in this book found “the possibility of a future hermeneutics” on the knowledge that their contact with “the understanding” will rarely be smooth—and on the certainty that there is no shame to being found out as defective, if it happens at the end of an investigation like those recounted here.

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