

wybińnych. Według Gilmora'a, przy lekturze ich dzieł, konieczna jest większa doza tolerancji, która może dopomóc w nowym odczytaniu ich pisaństwa.

Mocne osadzenie literatury w kontekście zmian politycznych i społecznych, bogata i wszechstronna analiza dynamiki społecznej tamtych czasów to cechy wyróżniające The Cambridge History spośród innych prac na temat historii wczesnej literatury amerykańskiej. Inną ważną cechą książki jest przekonanie jej autorów — niezbyt powszechnie podzielane — że wczesna literatura amerykańska jest i ważna i fascynująca sama w sobie, a nie jedynie jako zapowiedź literatury późniejszej. Autorem udaje się chyba przekazać swoje przekonanie czytelnikom. Pomimo że uwaga twórców historii skierowana jest raczej na procesy niż na fakty, to — dzięki zamieszczeniu kilkunastuosobowej chronologii wczesnej literatury amerykańskiej oraz wyczerpującej bibliografii tematu — praca broni się również jako dzieło encyklopedyczne.

Równie ważne jest to, iż wcześniej zgłaszane obawy, że Bercovitch pójdzie jeszcze dalej niż Elliott w schlebaniu tym, którzy od prac naukowych oczekują przede wszystkim „poprawności politycznej” okazały się bezpodstawne. Nie ma w The Cambridge History tanich chwytów politycznych, nie ma nachalnego promowania tekstów niemych, tylko ze względu na ich wartości ideologiczne, nie ma też irytującej retoryki politycznej. Jeśli autorzy esejów w kolejnych tomach potrafią — przy omawianiu kwestii znacznie bardziej delikatnych i kontrowersyjnych — zachować takie właśnie podejście, to The Cambridge History będzie można w przyszłości bez wahania nazwać dziełem wybińnym.

Jerzy Durczak

Agata Preis-Smith. „Inventions of Farewell”: American Elegiac Poetry from the Puritans to Modern Times. Warszawa: University of Warsaw Institute of English Studies, 1995; str. 229

One of the pleasant surprises of Agata Preis-Smith's „Inventions of Farewell”: American Elegiac Poetry from the Puritans to Modern Times is the scope of the book's interest. Inventions is much more than a narrowly specialized study of the genre which one tends to think of as primarily historical since it has become twisted almost beyond recognition in the hands of contemporary poets. Offering a thorough discussion of the many transformations which the American elegy has undergone over the last four hundred years, the book is also a capsule course in American literary history as well as in the history of ideas and attitudes, especially those related to transience, loss, death, and dying.

This wide perspective of the study is due to a considerable measure to the very inclusive understanding of the term „elegy” which the author has adopted. She defines the elegy as a poetic form that „relies on the linguistic, narrative reenactment of the psychological process of mourning” (7). This broad definition is stretched further by acknowledging a wide variety of causes for mourning. In Preis-Smith's view the cause need not be the death of an individual (as is the case in traditional ancient and European pastoral elegies); the cause may be any loss — whether of one's youth or one's sense of wholeness, purpose or belonging — and any death, whether of a myth, national dream, or of an entire civilization. By the standards adopted in the book, any poem that is an expression of grief stemming from even a most unspecified and diffuse sense of absence or deprivation is classifiable as elegiac.

A definition so inclusive permits the author to view as elegies or near-elegies a very large number of poems. In fact, the list of texts which she discusses in the book reads like a roll-call of American poetic classics both past and contemporary. As can be expected, in Inventions of Farewell one finds Preis-Smith taking a closer look at Puritan elegies, Emerson's „Threnody,” Poe's „The Raven,” Whitman's „When Lilacs Last

in the Dooryard Bloomed" J.R. Lowell's "After the Burial," Melville's "Battle Pieces" and Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." Less predictably, she offers fascinating studies of a host of familiar poems which, as she demonstrates, "follow ... elegiac structure without admitting or even realizing the fact" (116). These include Melville's "Charel" ("a poem lamenting man's cognitive helplessness in a world deprived of faith" — 105), a whole sequence of Dickinson's less explicitly elegiac pieces (dealing "with diverse aspects of what one could generally define as 'separation'" — 84), Robinson's poems of Tilbury Town ("the buried structure of these appears itself to constitute a fragment of the mourning process initiated by the death within the story" — 109), Crane's "A Man Said to the Universe ("a mournful confirmation of man's isolation under an empty sky" — 111), Eliot's The Waste Land ("a poem about modern loss" — 126), Master's Spoon River Anthology ("a discontinuous elegy on a world once known" — 146), and — to bring the list up to the present — O'Hara's "The Day the Lady Died," Ginsberg's "Howl," Plath's "Daddy," and Berryman's Dream Songs.

The list is much longer; it includes almost all key American names. Two puzzling exceptions ignored in the book are Frost and Jeffers, both profoundly elegiac poets, to whom, one wishes, Preis-Smith had devoted some of her precise and analytical attention. But interestingly enough, to notice the absence of these two or, perhaps, more names is to, in fact, realize the accuracy of the conclusion about American poetry in general which Preis-Smith indirectly makes in Inventions. This conclusion is that the elegiac tradition in American poetry has always been among the strongest, and that it is to the elegiac and not any other vein that many of the best and most famous pieces of American poetry belong.

Studying the historical transformations of America elegy, Preis-Smith awaits herself of two basic tools. One is the Freudian concept (modified by the post-Freudian psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and John Bowlby) of the "successful work of mourning." According to Freud dealing with loss is a process that involves a series of stages. If the process is to eventually lead to reconciliation and healing, each of the stages has to be experienced in proper succession. The stages include an initial rejection of the fact of loss followed by compulsive, repeated

acknowledgement of one's bereavement, rebellion against fate or whatever protective forces the mourner recognizes, self-blaming and self-aggression, and finally reconciliation and acceptance. The other tool or yardstick made use of in the book is the traditional, classical and European elegy which, as a poetic narrative of confronting loss, recounts all of these steps of "successful mourning."

Viewed against the background of these two paradigms, American elegies, Preis-Smith argues, have been distinguished by the incompleteness with which they represent the process of mourning. She writes:

No epoch in American history has been conducive to the achieving of the complete and thus successful work of mourning in all its stages as defined by Freud. In each century of the American past, culture and society has required the repression of at least one crucial link in the process or narrative of mourning... With the notable exception of Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" which remains safely (or so it seems) within the confines of the European pastoral tradition, American poems of mourning are characterized by fragmentation and inconclusiveness, by an open ended departure from the scene of loss, as if no Authority were able to resolve the mourner's painful argument with himself and with the world.

(8)

Inventions of Farewell offers a thorough, insightful, and scholarly impressive argument explaining why this was so at various historical moments and why the situation remains unchanged today. Each historical and literary epoch curbed the American elegist in the free and full expression of grief in a different way and for a different set of reasons. The Puritan, for instance, rigorously controlled his emotions urged to do so by the doctrinal demands of Calvinism, as well as by the dominant esthetic conventions. The Romantic elegist of the Fireside tradition, living in the times which cultivated overt expression of emotionality, could — unlike his Puritan predecessor — give full vent to his grief and self-pity, but at the same time, because of the contemporary tendency to sentimentalize and domesticate death, would refuse to struggle seriously with his pain or anger, accepting instead the easiest and most superficial consolations. Contemporary poets, in turn, write their elegies circumscribed

by the Modernist legacy and by their own historical experience. Brought up on the Modernist tradition of ironic distancing from and „objectivization“ of loss, and moreover, mindful of the horrors of modern mass-annihilation, they repress the elegiac narrative and absolutely refuse to lament, deeming no consolation possible or desirable. At the same time, in the epoch of multiculturalism and general interest in „otherness“ — ethnic, generic, sexual — an increasingly numerous group of poets subverts altogether the traditional paradigms of mourning, proposing alternative patterns of accommodating loss. Preis-Smith's discussion of these intricate relationships between the shape American elegies took at any given historical moment and the ideological, socio-economic, and even political contexts of their making accounts for the most interesting and most informative passages in her book.

If there is one thing that may trouble the reader of *Inventions of Farewell*, it is certain incongruity between the drive of Preis-Smith's argument and the language in which she found herself trapped as a result of her choice of methodology. In the concluding chapter of her book, Preis-Smith sums up the history of the American elegy in the following words:

Throughout centuries, American elegists have always attempted, consciously or not, to create conventions of their own — rituals of mourning and of its esthetic expression alternative to those of the Old Continent. Their poems have been „alternative“ as a consequence of their country's different history, culture, landscape, even climate. These differences have continued up to the modern times, when the imperative to produce native paradigms received a new ideological stimulus from recognition of the essentially multicultural character of American experience. (218-219)

Indeed, this is the implication of Preis-Smith's argument throughout the book: analyzing individual elegies, she repeatedly demonstrates how American poets tested the limits of the genre, modifying and subverting its conventions, and adapting it to their own needs. And yet this positive argument is persistently phrased in a language of negation. Because of the two models against which Preis-Smith sets the poems she discusses — the psychological model of complete process of mourning and the literary

model of traditional pastoral — she has no choice but to repeatedly resort to the vocabulary of incompleteness, failure, truncation. Here are some examples chosen at random to illustrate the problem. The Puritan elegy, she writes, is marked by the „narrative fragmentation“ because it „eliminates“ either lamentation or consolation (42). Dickinson „never develops the narrative of mourning“ even though „it would be possible to construct fully-developed elegies out of these fragments“ (93). Most twentieth century elegies can be described as „narcissistic in their fixation on 'unsuccessful' mourning in the classical Freudian terms“ (135). As the quotation marks around „unsuccessful“ in the last example indicate clearly, Preis-Smith is fully aware of the complications which this kind of language causes, and — let this be said emphatically — she never suggests that departure from or failure to meet either of her two standards equals inferiority. Nevertheless, despite her intentions, this is what her vocabulary of incompleteness, fragmentation, and distortion persistently implies. The reader of *Inventions* must always be on the alert not to lose sight of the fact that it is precisely the liberty with which American elegies treat these psychological and literary models of completeness that accounts for their artistic triumph.

Even so, *Inventions of Farewell* is an impressive book, informative, meticulously researched, and genuinely absorbing. Last but not least it is readable. Preis-Smith is a critic considerate of her readers. She does not obscure her argument by relying excessively upon specialized, inaccessible critical jargon. Nor does she forget that a recapitulation now and then of the points previously made can greatly facilitate the reading. As a result, the reader of her book who has studied the introductory chapter, may continue by choosing any of the passages devoted to the poems of his interest and be sure that he will find the argument comprehensible and the reading rewarding.

Joanna Durczak