

Maureen McLane: My Poetics

Review: Maureen McLane: *My Poetics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024, 296 pp., 22,50 USD.

Maureen McLane's *My Poetics* is a wonderful whirlwind of multiple modes of writing and registers of thought, explored through poetry. It is also a book that worries, sometimes overtly, at other moments between the lines. It worries about climate crises, the immensity of the ruins of capitalism, and how forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism, continuously materialize. McLane (poet, author, critic, teacher, scholar and reader) does not position poetry as a saving force in light of these worries. But she does ponder: How might poetry relate to and move with/through/against these concerns? The five, stand-alone chapters (*Conditional/Poetics*, *Compositional/Poetics*, *Notational/Poetics*, *Rhyme/Poetics*, and *Chorotopical/Poetics*) of *My Poetics* do not answer these questions definitively. Yet, by taking a closer look at various poetic traditions and examples, McLane opens up corridors of thought and action that show glimpses of what responding to one's present may look like.

In *Conditional/Poetics*, McLane contemplates what it means to think about poetry that tests its conditions and conditioning force. The chapter opens with the following words: "There is a phrase that has haunted me for years—Hannah Arendt's 'to think what we are doing'" (p. 1). McLane is not the first to be haunted by this sentence. However, rather than dissecting what Arendt might have meant, McLane takes these words as a springboard for a meditation on poetry and its surroundings. Poetry is conditioned by thought and experience but can condition thought too. In its form, poetry can break contemplation open. It can play with various temporalities to emphasize that what has happened could have happened differently and what has not happened might still happen. This speculative thinking is especially useful when one thinks what one is doing. It is also this speculative thinking (and the recurring echo of Arendt's *to think what we are doing*), that is spun like a red thread throughout the book.

Compositional/Poetics embraces a great attentiveness for the manner in which poems are "co-composed" and "made and unmade together" (p. 60). A compositional poetics is relational. It concerns the intertwinement between humans, plants, grammar, and syntax. McLane demonstrates this through the example of ballads. Ballads are narrational poems. They hold musical quality which is enforced through their use of rhythm and repetition. Hereby, a ballad can be situated between poem and song, and above all, when read, the ballad begs to be performed and thus requires an audience too. This in-betweenness is an entrance for critiquing an anthropocentric and hierarchical view of life. Being co-composed comes with responsibility and care for all others. Compositional poetics can think of life as a web of relations devoid of hierarchy yet deeply concerned with the fabric out of which it is spun.



How are we further enmeshed with our surroundings? *Notational/Poetics* wonders what happens when we let go of the need (or desire) to fabricate continuously more things. Notational poetics do not depend on the imagination to fabricate, rather, they take note of their environments, '(re)using' what is already there. This is a durable practice, for the poetic materials are reused rather than made anew. To McLane, the notational hints at "a dialectic between condensation and dilation" (p. 113), and the haiku is a good example of this. A haiku has limited space. Complex experiences, feelings, and thoughts must be condensed and dilated into a few, carefully selected words which capture a reflection that goes beyond mere observation. A notational poetics moves between experience and thought through condensation and dilation. Thereby, it can make sense of or provide judgement about something.

At the risk of extending *My Poetics* too far beyond its scope, I do not find it difficult to imagine that Arendt would be excited by these reflections too. A notational poetics is durable. It is about finding what is there, rather than using continuously more resources to fabricate new things. Additionally, a notational poetics can place judgements on experiences through distance and then condensation, themes very much explored by Arendt too.

The most fragmented chapter is *Rhyme/Poetics*. Rhyme, falsely accused of being outdated (at times childish even), is given ample space by McLane to show how it coordinates thought and reading practices by playing with structures and surprise. Rhyme schemes work with clues and hint at what is to come. Hereby, rhymes play with expectations and by going against the expected, a rhyming scheme can undo the anticipated structure that was just set up. Additionally, rhymes can bring rhythms, sounds, and languages together, showing too the historical and material entanglement of life and lives.

The final chapter, *Chorotopical/Poetics*, is about "a poetry dedicated to an emergent, precarious commons" (p. 194). It is about undoing, rewriting, and counter narrating. How can 'the given' turn into 'the strange', so another story can be told? In this chapter, McLane takes inspiration from so-called 'project books': poetry collections which aim to *do* something. Their common denominator is their ability to make something *sound* out of place (chorotopical), to present an alternative telling, a counternarrative. Hereby, this chapter, as the preceding ones, demonstrates what happens when thinking can move freely: to think and critique what we are doing via speculative yet rigid (linguistic and formal) means.

My Poetics is about (un)doing, creating space, and crafting new narratives. McLane's joy for poetry jumps off every page and the author shows how it looks to (think about what it means to) think what we are doing. This personal and speculative exploration never reaches a final conclusion but stays in motion through each poem it encounters. *My Poetics* is first and foremost a piece of autotheory. It compellingly weaves personal meditations together with poetry analysis and philosophical reflection. Because of this, it

is inspiring for anyone curious about the different shapes contemplation can take. And while this book is not a typical academic text (as it does not desire to be), and while this review seems perhaps out of place in this journal, it is precisely all of the aforementioned that readers of Arendt's work must surely appreciate too.

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