

Haas (Rudolf), ed. *Amerikanische Lyrik. Perspektiven und Interpretationen*

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Eeckhout Bart. Haas (Rudolf), ed. *Amerikanische Lyrik. Perspektiven und Interpretationen*. In: Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire, tome 70, fasc. 3, 1992. Langues et littératures modernes — Moderne taal- en letterkunde. pp. 864-866;

https://www.persee.fr/doc/rbph_0035-0818_1992_num_70_3_3855_t1_0864_0000_2

Fichier pdf généré le 16/04/2018

Apart from the riches that results from drawing on the expertise of various specialists, one other advantage of working with separate essays proves to be the possibility for including texts that deal with topics only tangentially related to the general issue of American literature. Thus we find a number of (often very interesting) discussions of a more political, cultural and sociological nature, as well as one on the most significant developments in the field of literary criticism. The obvious disadvantage of the method, however, is that no real completeness or comprehensiveness — though both are of course claimed on the backcover blurb — is reached and that an excessively large share of the text is devoted to « major » writers, whose canonical status is thus once again confirmed. As a compensation for this the volume closes with an extensive bibliography, compiled by Peter Davison. Though on the whole quite useful, this bibliography does however have some significant shortcomings. The absence of such names as J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman among the hundreds of critics mentioned is already — to say the least — striking. But more remarkable even is the list of (no less than) 174 important American authors (including their major works and some secondary material on them): not only does it contain a few blemishes (like passing off Helen Vendler's famous study of Stevens, *On Extended Wings*, as one of Stevens's own works) but it also uses very bizarre criteria of selection. For how does one justify entries on such twentieth-century writers as Samuel Behrman, David Belasco, Richard Brautigan, Ed Bullins, Marc Connelly, Lorraine Hansberry, Sidney Howard, Stanley Kunitz, William Saroyan and Budd Schulberg, but *not* on clearly more important figures like H. D., Robinson Jeffers, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Denise Levertov, Richard Wilbur (America's second poet laureate, one of the finest of all living writers, is not mentioned once in the entire book!), James Merrill, John Ashbery, William Gaddis or Robert Coover? Surely this cannot be excused by a simple *de gustibus*... — Bart EECKHOUT.

HAAS (Rudolf), ed. *Amerikanische Lyrik. Perspektiven und Interpretationen*. Berlin, Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1987; one volume, 3 illustrations, 303 p. — This collection of essays rounds off the ambitious project of the famous German comparatist and Americanist, Edgar Lohner, to have American literature discussed in three high-quality scientific studies, focusing on each of the three traditional genres, prose, drama and poetry. Because Lohner unexpectedly died while the production of the second volume was still running, the further working-out of the project was trusted to the Hamburg professor, Rudolf Haas, who loyally followed and developed the sketches and ideas left behind by his predecessor.

With the exception of one American guest-writer, all nineteen contributors to *Amerikanische Lyrik* (which contains eighteen essays in all) are renowned German-speaking specialists, a number of which teach in the United States. Their contributions are for the greater part written in German, but there are also five texts in English.

The book divides into two major parts. The six longish essays that constitute its first part offer more general perspectives on several diverse aspects pertaining to American poetry. The second part consists of twelve interpretations of as many (reprinted) poems.

Rudolf Haas himself opens the series with a good historical overview of American poetry and an extensive discussion of what to his mind are its six most conspicuous characteristics. In an exhaustive and excellent article Bettina and Herwig Friedl then devote their attention to the Fireside Poets, who are studied both collectively — as a social institution — and individually; the reception history of these American *Biedermeier*, too, is painted, and this in a text which has the great virtue of neither ridiculing nor glorifying its topic. By Volker Bischoff's hand there is a limpid and succinct collection of materials to illustrate the simultaneous presence of both tradition and experiment during the years of the « Poetic Renaissance » (1912-22). In a thematic study Günter Ahrends then adduces a rich spectrum of twentieth century poems that voice a variety of poetological beliefs. Thus he is able to make a few interesting juxtapositions, but his commenting on certain obscure poems that are neither quoted in the text nor readily traceable, is at times more irritating than illuminating. The next essay tackles the so-called « Antithetical Criticism » of the authoritative Yale critic and theoretician, Harold Bloom. Claus Uhlig's highly intellectual analysis of Bloom's views is trenchant and his accusation of inverted scientific behavior (with Bloom, he claims, the development of a theory precedes the concrete study of literary works) is lucid and convincing. In Uhlig's view, Bloom's strength and importance are to be found above all in the many intertextual discoveries he has made. Part one of the book is concluded by Claus Clüver, who writes a fascinating and well-documented history of the avant-garde « Concrete Poetry », which he sees as an expression of the *homo semioticus* of the fifties and sixties.

Part two — the interpretations of separate poems — begins with a hardly relevant and needlessly high-flown discussion of Anne Bradstreet's « Autumn ». The text accompanying Edward Taylor's « Meditation I, 34 », on the contrary, is a lot more transparent and helps to increase our respect and admiration for Taylor's achievement as a literary frontiersman. It is followed by « On the Anniversary of the Storming of the Bastille », a poem on the basis of which an ample and clear picture is painted of Philip Freneau's political lyrics, his ideological beliefs and their historical origins. « Telling the Bees », by John Greenleaf Whittier, turns out to be a good choice given the modest reputation of its author, and the comment it elicits makes a short but fine contribution to what is purported to be a Whittier-revival. Edgar Allan Poe's « The Raven », on the contrary, is of course much more of a classic, but the analysis it is given does not therefore suffer from a lack of originality: it goes after the « under-currents » in the many-layered text and, in doing so, spotlights important characteristics of the poem such as its platonism and its perverse and demonic sides. In the discussion of Edwin Markham's « The Man with the Hoe » a few aspects of the *Zeitgeist*, such as Darwinism and positivism,

are singled out to explain the poem's tremendous success at the turn of the century. The carefully built argument that follows centers around Robert Frost's deceptively simple and descriptive « The Mountain ». In it Frost is defined as a « georgic », « emblematic » poet with, on the one hand, clear roots in several literary and cultural traditions (especially classical literature and puritanism), and, on the other hand, a distinctly modern sensibility. Next, Carl Sandburg's much-anthologized « Chicago » gives rise to a topological study, which also evokes more generally the literary image of the metropolis on Lake Michigan. The exegesis of the poem itself is interesting in that it focuses, among other things, on a few contradictions in Sandburg's eulogy. From William Carlos Williams there is the short poetic cycle, « Pictures from Brueghel ». (Three useful black and white reproductions are added here). Rather than on Williams' intrinsic artistic achievement the main emphasis has been placed on a detailed comparison with the original paintings, the way the poet may have learnt about them, his congeniality with the painter and the structure of the cycle. Pound-adepts will be pleased to read a learned and highly specialized analysis of « Canto I » and especially of the influence of Homer (via Divus' Latin translation) on its conception. Apart from meticulous philological microscopy this essay also offers the genealogical history of « Canto I » through its different versions. The last article but one looks at e. e. cummings' beautiful « i sing of Olaf glad and big » and accurately typifies the major themes in the works of this underestimated modernist. Finally, there is a short text on Owen Dodson's « Prisoners »; a bit slovenly, at times far-fetched and rather vaguely intuitive it gives the impression of a not very inspired rush job.

A great diversification, on the one hand, and solidity, erudition and thoroughness, so often associated with German scholarship, on the other, are the most conspicuous assets of *Amerikanische Lyrik*. Without aprioristic enthusiasm or condescension the essayists turn, in the best of Husserlian traditions, « zu den Sachen selbst »; nor do they allow their texts to be dictated by modish literary theories. The *modus operandi* with the two big parts results in a wide variety of perspectives, so that the phenomenon of American poetry is covered in many of its aspects. In addition, the *explications de texte* of part two usually present a balanced mixture of more general and biographical sketches with more concrete close readings (and often a useful selected bibliography is appended as well). The choice of the general topics and the individual poems is of course always disputable: in the latter case, for instance, not a few great names are missing, like those of W. Whitman, E. Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, W. Stevens, H. Crane, R. Lowell, R. Wilbur, J. Berryman, A. Ginsberg or S. Plath. But, full completeness being unattainable anyhow, it should be noted that those poets that *were* selected are often represented by interesting and fresh pieces. And the presence of a subject like « Concrete Poetry » proves that also in alternating between the classical evergreens and less conventional contributions this book is well-balanced and enriching. — B. EECKHOUT.