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Necessary Edutainment – A Review of *Miracles of Rare Device: English Verse from the Elizabethans to the Moderns* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2009)

The overtly-expressed goal of *Miracles of Rare Device: English Verse from the Elizabethans to the Moderns* is to provide a student-friendly anthology of poetry. In this, the book is a success. Mojca Krevl and Uroš Mozetič are sneaky and wily in their attempts to make poetry more palatable to young people: for each poet they begin with easy-to-digest biographical and historical facts, throw in some trivia and delectable quotations, before setting you up with fine lines of verse; then they knock you out with questions in the section “To Consider” that follows each poem. Those students still standing are referred to more traditional studies in the way of a short bibliography for further reading. Aside from students forced to read poetry for English studies, I can well imagine armchair poetry enthusiasts perusing this volume with enjoyment.

I have always felt that teaching poetry in the classroom is a fundamentally unnatural way of promoting this most intimate of reading acts, and Krevl and Mozetič seem to share this view. They state in the introduction that their aim is “also to encourage further individual explorations” (8), especially in the series of questions that accompany each poem. These are not the facile or intensely focused questions typical of such anthologies, but truly thought-provoking as well as wide-ranging. For example, apropos Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” readers are asked to “Identify the lines revealing specifically pre-Romantic attitudes and stances” (94). This is laudable because, rather than inviting students merely to regurgitate that this poem is taken a precursor of the Romantic movement, individuals have to look for particular images and thoughts within the poem.

The focus on interconnection between poems and poets is also admirable, making for a degree of flow and continuity even as Krevl and Mozetič whisk us through five centuries in three hundred pages. They revisit the sonnet tradition (with regard to Wyatt, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and later practitioners) often enough that students who merely read the questions will already be in good shape to discuss this fourteen-line poetic form. Elsewhere, Krevl and Mozetič authors make thematic connections and invite links across generations, such as when asking that readers compare Robert Southey’s 19th century coolly distant “After Blenheim,” about the 1704 Battle, with Wilfred Owen’s tragic and graphic “Dulce Et Decorum Est” written during World War I.

A student who conscientiously worked through all of the suggestions in this book would be deserving of a PhD in English literature. Indeed, many of the individual questions warrant a PhD thesis: “Situate Robert Browning within his historical and literary context and point out the main trends in the literary production on his time” (178); “Investigate the usage of the comma in Shakespeare’s times” (34) (and that’s only part of the query!). This is not bad. A range

of questions is positive, because often a sameness of thought can develop if all the questions are more or less of the same form (such as in anthologies that ask us to consider rhyme scheme or metre ad nauseam over centuries of verse).

The book is thinner than your average anthology, but also more fun. My two-volume *Norton Anthology of English Literature* – all 5194 pages of it – left me bereft of this knowledge: “actress Meg Ryan’s film production company is named Prufrock Pictures after her favourite poem” (234). This tidbit was a double surprise for me, since not only does it fly in the face of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as a poem for reticent males, it also portrays Ms. Ryan as a wallflower. Who knew? At a time when poetry appears to be on the decline among young people, I consider such shameless popularization a noble undertaking. More than edutainment, this is an awareness of the customer’s needs.

The desire to make things attractive occasionally leads to stumbling. Kregel and Mozetič attribute this line to *Rabbie Burns*: “Opera is where a guy gets stabbed in the back, and instead of dying, he sings” (108). If this does not sound like an 18th century Scotsman’s voice, it is because it is not. My dictionary claims that this particular use of “guy” post-dates the famous dialect poet (entering the lexicon about a decade after Burns’s death in 1796), and my *Oxford Book of Quotations* tells me that it stems from a radio joker who died in 1963. Burns may have said something similar, but never in these words.

Any poetry anthology necessarily exposes itself to criticism of the selection made, and every anthology review I have ever read asks in genuine or mock horror why Lewis Carroll and his seminal “Jabberwocky” are missing, or why there is no room for Sir John Betjeman and his edifying verse about All Things Very English. Choices have to be made, and in this volume the authors have done a good job. They want to popularize canonical works rather than attack the canon itself as they help students become familiar with the major poets of the past few centuries. Nevertheless, I have a few nuanced quibbles. Rubert Brooke is less seminal and influential a poet than Robert Graves, and the absence of Thomas Hardy is hard to fathom. That said, Brooke’s meretriciously optimistic “The Hill” (1915) is more thought-provoking than Thomas Hardy’s uniformly grim “Channel Firing” (1914) – especially when Kregel and Mozetič highlight this optimism in their post-poem questions. Philip Larkin’s “The Winter Palace,” which prosaically begins, “Most people know more as they get older: / I give all that the cold shoulder”, is a fine poem for old people. But perhaps his racier, trashier “This Be the Verse” – which begins “They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do” – would have been the better choice in a volume out to attract students.

Miracles of Rare Device concludes with a section entitled “Tools of the Trade,” which takes readers on a terminological journey from “Acatalectic” to “Zeugma,” briefly stopping for humour and cranial repose at “Poet” (“a person who writes poetry”). The list is more complete than those in many similar anthologies, but the definitions occasionally err on the side of brevity or glibness. For “Assonance,” we are referred to lines 38–40 of Yeats’s “Byzantium.” Surely it would have been just as easy to write something like, “ride to the sky” or, failing that, to refer the busy student to a poem actually contained in this volume. Nevertheless, the glossary, like the anthology as a whole, deserves space on every Slovenian English student’s desk.