
Nick Halpern. *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. 293p.

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Everyday and Prophetic is concerned with unpacking the *feel* of postwar American poetry, using the prophetic and everyday genres of speech as means of reckoning it. Feel is horribly difficult to quantify, and Halpern takes pains to develop a taxonomy of features he identifies with prophetic and everyday voices that is sympathetic to what he takes to be the project of each poet. Halpern has gleaned critical vocabulary from the later writings of both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Mikhail Bakhtin, and constructed from it a very plastic and supple apparatus of potential features related to each other on the Wittgensteinian principle of family resemblance. An everyday voice may differ from its undifferentiated neighbors in ten thousand ways, but for Halpern, it must have at least one feature that identifies it as one of the everyday family, and that feature may or may not be shared by all or even most of the other identifiably everyday voices. The flexibility of this model is matched by a need for exceptionally close attention to detail, in order for the reader to see how they operate in specific poems and how they relate to one another at the “family” category they constitute. Given that Wittgenstein’s favorite English poet was the archetypal prophet, William Blake, Halpern’s choice of Wittgenstein’s model for understanding this material seems serendipitous. Halpern does not offer a table of features for either the everyday or the prophetic voice, as one might expect. Instead, he introduces both voices with a set of touchstones, and moves on to explore the role of each in the corpi of several postwar poets.

The primary feature of everydayness seems to be, in virtually every poem Halpern selects for analysis, a (presumably white) bourgeois perspective and sensibility. This is conventional; William Wordsworth watches the leech gatherer in admiration, but does not himself gather leeches. Halpern observes that the “disappointment we feel when either voice goes wrong is particularly sharp” (3). It may be that considering voices of those who dig someone else’s coal or wash someone else’s laundry gets the conventionally everyday voice “wrong.” Halpern approaches farm work in his analysis of A.R. Ammons’ “Hardweed Path Going,” but the perspective of this poem is not in the moment of the everyday act of caring for and then slaughtering hogs, but in the later moment of a man indulging in nostalgia, slumming in his own past, and “living in a world of the georgic” (121). We see poets such as James Merrill meditating on “them” as they rip up a section of “my” pavement (148). Halpern’s treatment of Jorie Graham’s poem “The

Geese” emphasizes the everydayness of a woman hanging her laundry in her own backyard, a space she inhabits casually, like a *flaneur* (241-243), without examining what it is that makes the possession of a backyard in air clean enough for outdoor clothes-drying everyday, and why such an act in a poem — like the indulgence in nostalgia, or a narration of watching someone else do roadwork — *feels* everyday.

By contrast, Halpern’s groundbreaking exploration of the prophetic mode represents a genuine advance toward clearer understanding the use of prophetic gestures in secular verse. Halpern is at his most productive in his examination of the only explicitly prophetic poet (in the sense of being inspired by supernatural means) he chooses: James Merrill. While Halpern asserts with certainty that “There is no spirit world” (138), he is willing to take Merrill’s Ouija-board experiments with his partner David Jackson and their revealed cosmology seriously enough to detangle their significance and the complexity of their position relative to the poets ventriloquised in them, specifically W.B. Yeats and (through him) Blake and John Milton. While it would seem that Merrill would be working in the idiom of the *vates*, or even the solitary, inspired voice crying in the wilderness, Halpern observes that the opposite is true (167). The prophet, typically the outsider *par excellence*, is in this instance a pair of sociable lovers and a community of insiders. For this reason, Merrill’s masterpiece *The Changing Light at Sandover* is unique: “What other long prophetic poem features prophecy delivered to a couple?” (166). The singular prophet-figure is made into a set of relationships among voices, and among listeners. All of these relationships and voices are treated as worthy of poetic dignity, even of normalcy. According to Halpern, Merrill uses prosody to distinguish among these voices: “iambic pentameter [is] for human characters (living or dead), syllabic fourteeners [are] for the bats. The unicorn speaks in Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter” (164). For Merrill, the prophetic voice can be ciphered with craft through *any* speaker. Here, the prophetic-and-everyday structure Halpern has assembled works best; “the spirit voices are actually interested in the daily life the two men share” (168), and the men seem interested enough in the spirits to carry on a life-long relationship with them. Merrill is not interested in the destratification implied in this gesture toward consensual polyglossia, however. Where Milton, Blake, and Yeats use prophecy as a means of understanding and perhaps guiding politics, Halpern argues that Merrill turns and shrugs from any kind of social conscience. According to Halpern, Merrill’s “cosmology is built, complacently, on injustices” (181). Merrill and Jackson are content doing nothing in an inspired way (180), living leisurely.

Prophecy as a genre is, as Halpern's Wittgensteinian family-tree model for it suggests, very plastic transhistorically. One need only juxtapose Moses' articulation of power against the dream interpretation of Daniel, or (in the English tradition) the visions of Jane Lead against those of Aurobindo Ghose, to see this. The conventions of prophecy are too many and too varied to expediently use as arbiters of a poem's relative propheticity, as Halpern promises to use them. Instead, Halpern trusts the reader to recognize with him his examples as prophetic (or everyday, for that matter) as he proceeds with his typically insightful and rewarding readings. The prophetic voice, unfortunately, remains under-examined. One solution for scholars working on prophetic literature is to approach inspiration as an act of self-fashioning, in the way that one might approach a memoir or any other kind of testimony. The conventions of memoir may remain undefined, but its family tree has at least one feature shared by all members: its veracity. Similarly, a text may be considered prophetic if its composer, explicitly or not, reveals it to be inspired by an external, typically spiritual or supernatural, force. Defining the everyday in a way that is not exclusive of anyone's experience, however, remains a much more vexing problem. ✱