
Paul Manfredi. *Modern Poetry in China: A Visual-Verbal Dynamic*. Amherst, New York: Cambria, 2014. 246p.

DIAN LI

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

China, E.E. Cummings writes, is “where a painter is a poet.” It is possible that the poet/painter is projecting himself onto the image of China for a fun-filled aesthetic adventure, but such an impression of China as a place of poetry was not far from the common imagination in Cummings’s time, an imagination, no doubt, bolstered by Ezra Pound’s “discovery” of the Chinese character as a medium for poetry, to which early Cummings owes a great deal of poetic debt. We all know the story of how Pound felt inspired by the directness of the Chinese character and made it a premise for his theory for Imagism, and one has good reason to guess that it is upon the same premise that Paul Manfredi conceives *Modern Poetry in China: A Visual-Verbal Dynamic* since the book begins with a quotation from E. E. Cummings’s above-mentioned poem.

The convergence of the poet and the painter is what Manfredi calls “a visual-verbal dynamic,” a concept that emphasizes the visual dimension of poetic art. He elaborates three aspects of this “dynamic”: phanopoesi—the making of the imagery; phenomenology—seeing the lyrical subject; and pictography of the characters of the Chinese writing system. It is refreshing to see such a succinct yet precise description of the visual aesthetics of the poem, which prompts us to look anew at a topic we thought we already knew. Manfredi not only contributes a keen synthesis of poetic theories; his ability to apply these theories to the analysis of poets and poems makes the visual elements apparent to us at the basic structural levels of space, shape, and word-image.

But, if poetry is always “visual,” and Chinese poetry is particularly so, or as Manfredi more lucidly puts it, “the nexus of visibility and lyrical poetry is very old in the Chinese setting” (xx), how does the “visual-verbal dynamic” crisscross the “modern” in modern poetry? His answer is not an exact definition of Chinese modernism based on the usual premise of a radical rupture between the new, vernacular poem and the old, regulated one. Rather, he stresses the continuation of visibility by giving an eloquent argument for the importance of calligraphy in the Chinese art of poetry-making. Calligraphy, a long-running visual-verbal art form, not only typifies the intermixing of the poem and the painting in the Chinese tradition, but also brings forth ideas of abstraction and minimalism, two of the most celebrated aesthetic principles in modernism. To see modern poetry in this regard, Manfredi avoids the often contested but tired issue of China versus the West, and locates the “modern” squarely in the “materiality of the word” in which visibility is seen as its most prominent expression. The book for the most part is an attempt to discover and to interpret the variety of such an expression in selected Chinese poets.

One might raise a minor objection to Manfredi’s selection of poets for various reasons. For example, why only Li Jinfu from the pre-1949 period? Why give three individual chapters to three poets from Taiwan but group contemporary Chinese poets in two chapters? Indeed, whether the idea of visibility is being used as an identity marker for poet-painter or as an aesthetic pursuit for poetry making (it can be argued that the book treats it both ways), one can make a case for a far longer list of poets in modern China. Such an objection, however, hardly undermines the main thesis that “a visual-verbal dynamic” was present from the very begin-

ning of modern Chinese poetry and continues to the present day, with poets of different time and space constructing the complexity of the modern lyrical subject. Despite their vastly different historical contexts, according to Manfredi, Li Jinfa and Ji Xian share a common thread of self-portrait as art in word and in painting, which presents “a picturing of the self that is virtually boundless” (60). For the Taiwanese poet Luo Qing, the self thrives in the guise of the modern literati who exploit “the rifts between differing media of expression” (90), especially the elasticity of the Chinese written character itself. Xiao Yu, another poet from Taiwan who is arguably the most experimental and the most challenging of all poets writing in Chinese today, takes the boundary-breaking function of the form of collage to a dazzling height in order to constantly reconfigure the self from its traces of disappearance.

The delight of Manfredi’s book lies both in his theoretical disentanglement of the Chinese poetic modernity from its various related or contrasting notions and in his penetrating reading of individual poets, which illuminates seemingly obscure and difficult verbal and visual texts. This is evident not only in the case of rarely read works by familiar poets, such as the four poets mentioned above, but also in his re-reading of many canonical pieces from contemporary Chinese Misty Poetry, which is the focus of the latter part of the book. For example, about the final stanza of Bei Dao’s famous poem “The Answer,” he writes: “Two things appear immediately in this stanza alone: first, the explicit reference to human eyes and the phenomenology of ‘seeing’; second, the Chinese character itself both as a mode of watching and as watcher, a conduit or portal that both facilitates and executes seeing across and through the vicissitudes of time and space” (148). Similarly, the “visual lens” of Manfredi’s eyes enables him to re-energize Gu Cheng’s often quoted short poem “A Generation” (“Darkness has given me dark eyes / I use them to search for light”): “Its power, though, is also related to the fact that it takes seeing itself as its focus; it dramatizes the act of viewing in a way that substantiates the lyrical presence, providing not something new to see but a new act of seeing” (149). A strong reading, it is said by Barbara Johnson, is one that propagates the moment of surprise. It is no doubt that Manfredi is a strong reader of modern Chinese poetry and readers of his readings will find enjoyment in the many surprises that he has brought to the book.

Claudia Mills, ed. *Ethics and Children’s Literature*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2014. 264p.

THOMAS P. FAIR
ADAMS STATE COLLEGE – EXTENDED STUDIES

Ethics and Children’s Literature, edited by Claudia Mills, is the insightful, recent addition to the critically acclaimed series Ashgate Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present. While most readers familiar with children’s literature might assume the moral and ethical components of the literature to be obvious, Mills has assembled a selection of essays that moves the consideration of ethical factors in children’s literature to fresh topics of analysis.

The opening section, “The Dilemma of Didacticism: Attempts to Shape Children as Moral Beings,” examines earlier texts and probes the efforts to instill morality through literature. In “Transmitting Ethics through Books of Golden Deeds for Children,” Claudia Nelson surveys several examples of Books of Golden Deeds, primarily from 1864 through the 1920s, and