



## REVIEW

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**John Gibson, ed. *The Philosophy of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, ix+253 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-960367-1**

'[U]ntil very recently,' John Gibson writes in his introduction to this collection of eleven new philosophical essays on poetry, 'one could fairly say that poetry is the last great unexplored frontier in contemporary analytic aesthetics, an ancient and central art we have somehow managed to overlook more or less entirely.' (p. 1) Gibson's claim is not that philosophers of art have ignored literature in general, but that they have focused almost exclusively on a certain kind of literature (in particular, the novel) and on certain ways of engaging with art that are especially well suited to that kind (in particular, those in which narrative, and narrative understanding, are central). Thus, while many philosophers have thought deeply and well about fictional narratives, few have put as much thought into poetry. Each essay in *The Philosophy of Poetry* answers, in its own way, the question Gibson poses in his introduction: 'what happens to [philosophical thinking about literature] once the notion of a fictional narrative is rendered inapplicable or made of at best secondary importance?' (p. 11)

Unsurprisingly, there is no single answer to this question; a lot of things can happen once that philosophical move is made. As a result the essays here differ not only in the kinds of theories and positions they provide, but in their assumptions regarding what questions need to be asked and their conceptions of how questions in this area of philosophy are to be answered. What makes poetry distinct as a literary genre? What do poems mean? Is there such a thing as 'poetic' meaning? What do we do with poems that seem to resist meaning anything definite, or anything at all? What separates poetic language from other uses or forms of language? What kind or kinds of knowledge or insight do poems transmit to their readers? And of course, how should we characterize poetry's relation to truth?

The essay, Peter Lamarque's 'Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value,' is an appropriate opener; it places on the table several themes and questions that will recur in the essays to follow. Rather than trying to develop a definition of poetry, poetic language, or poetic meaning, Lamarque asks what the *value* of poetry might be. What makes the question interesting is in large part the fact that many of the features that enable poetry to accomplish its goals (whatever, precisely, these goals might be) would be seen as flaws in many other genres of writing. Ambiguity, for instance, is frequently praised in poetry, but is rarely



seen as a virtue in philosophical writing. (Of course, much the same could be said of other forms of literary writing; and indeed one of the questions that recurs throughout *The Philosophy of Poetry* is the question of what, precisely, distinguishes poems from other types of literary work.)

It is common to think that questions about the value of poetry may be properly answered by appealing to the nature of the experience provided by reading poems. Lamarque is sympathetic to this idea, but gives it a somewhat novel twist by focusing more than usual on the role of the reader, who does not simply find poetic experiences in poems, but calls such experiences forth by being committed to reading poetically. Thus Lamarque plausibly maintains that '[w]hat a poem is about [...] is its finegrained content identified by, certainly, but not equivalent to, its particular mode of articulation', while reminding us that 'about'-ness should be seen as interest-relative, so that the activities of poetry-writing and poetry-reading should be understood as being guided and indeed largely constituted by sets of conventions and expectations (p. 26). To read a text as a poem is to bring certain expectations regarding semantic density, ambiguity, unparaphrasability, and so forth to the text. The idea of form-content unity, for instance, rather than being an inherent feature discovered in the poem, is something that readers look for in and demand of poems, and in a sense produce through their practices of reading, since poetic content is conceived of as 'demand[ing] the most finegrained identity conditions; it is a content given in just this way, inseparable from the form of its presentation' (p. 31).

According to Lamarque's account, then, there is no inherent difference – or no deep inherent difference, anyway – between poems and other bits of language; the point of calling a bit of language a poem is to signal one's decision to treat it in certain ways. 'There is no poetic language as such,' he remarks (p. 34). A different approach is taken in Prinz and Mandelbaum's contribution 'Poetic Opacity: How to Paint Things with Words', whose express purpose is to defend a definition of poetry, and thus explain what distinguishes poetic language from other types of language. Prinz and Mandelbaum's proposed definition centres on 'poetic opacity', the property possessed by bits of language which 'make form more salient and important than it is elsewhere', and in doing so deliberately create 'a verbal barrier between reader and meaning' (p. 75).

The concept of 'poetic opacity' clearly captures something significant with respect to how poetry is to be read, though one might well wonder if it works in just the way Prinz and Mandelbaum propose. One worry is that the landscape in question is simply too complex to be captured by a simple generalization of the sort proposed here. After all, poems vary considerably in the degree of

poetic opacity they display, but a less opaque poem is no less a poem than an exceedingly opaque one.

Indeed, there are poems that seem to display little poetic opacity – consider, for instance, the opening lines of Ted Kooser’s ‘A Birthday Card’:

In her eighties now, and weak and ill  
with emphysema, my aunt sends me  
a birthday card – a tossing ocean  
with clipper ship – and wishes me well  
at forty-four. She’s included  
a note – hard-bitten in ballpoint,  
with a pen that sometimes skips whole words  
but never turns back [...]

It’s difficult to perceive a substantial barrier here between the words and their meanings; nor does one find one’s attention being drawn to the formal or material qualities of the words themselves. (The phrase ‘hard-bitten’ might, perhaps, be an exception – but one would expect as many exceptions, if not more so, in a random selection from a typical literary novel. Indeed, if anything, ‘hard-bitten’ stands out precisely because so much of the language here is resolutely commonplace.) Moreover, there are works of prose fiction that are, in the words of the authors, ‘infused [with] poetic opacity throughout’ (p. 82; examples might include Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*, Annie Dillard’s *The Maytrees*). Prinz and Mandelbaum are insistent that poetic opacity can provide a clear delineating line, but this seems doubtful. In discussing Carolyn Forché’s prose poem ‘The Colonel’, for instance, they write that the poem, despite having been written as ‘a diarist memoir’,

still strikes readers as poetry. We submit that this is the case because the work contains poetic opacity. For example, the poem is rife with the use of bodily imagery, which heightens the readers’ attention to sensation. The poem begins by offhandedly mentioning the relative mundanities of everyday gustatory experience: coffee, sugar, dinner, mangoes, salt, and bread. This sets the reader up for the shock of equating the truly startling desiccated ears with ordinary dried peach halves [...]. (pp. 80–81)

But examples abound of passages from short stories and novels that are ‘rife with the use of bodily imagery’, that list the ‘relative mundanities’ of various forms of everyday experience, and so forth. The problem, to be clear, is not that a reader who was already aware that ‘The Colonel’ was a poem would not cite the sorts of features Prinz and Mandelbaum suggest in support of that judgement. The problem is that such features would be equally present in, say, a randomly selected passage from a novel like *Coming Through Slaughter*, and

so cannot on their own settle the question of whether a piece of writing is a poem or not. In a footnote, the authors suggest that to deal with such cases, they would 'either need to show how the opacity inherent in these works is secondary to the works (either in purpose or in fact), or [would] need to argue that these works shouldn't be so neatly categorized as novels *tout court*' (p. 82). But neither of these options seems to me attractive; a much better option, I feel, is to allow that the opacity of the language, while constituting one of the factors that determines whether or not a given work is to be considered a poem, need not be the only factor we take into consideration.

Another possible worry about Prinz and Mandelbaum's position arises from their claim that the words in a poem function as a 'barrier' to meaning. The idea that the words out of which a poem is constructed have a dual role, functioning both as meaning-carrying symbols and as the materials out of which the poem is built, is surely correct. But must these materials get in the way of the content? They write: 'With poetry, words and phrases almost function as a barrier to content – pervasive and impossible to ignore. One might even say that poetic words distract – it is harder to immediately grasp the basic word meanings because of the cognitive load brought on from the poetic presentation. But whereas poetic words distract, prose words deliver.' (p. 76)

Again, however, this seems highly plausible with respect to some poems, far less so in connection with certain others. Some more experimental poets do write so as to divorce words from their meanings, sometimes to such an extent that the words could be said to 'distract' us both from their own meanings and from (at least some elements of) the poem's possible meanings. But there are many other poets of whom this cannot be said. In a poem by Seamus Heaney, for instance, the words are nearly always chosen and arranged in such a way that their materiality enhances, rather than detracts from, the meanings they and the poem convey. The words still call attention to themselves, and can in this sense be said to be 'opaque' – they are not, at any rate, merely a transparent screen through which the subject may be viewed. But the words, in all their materiality, cannot be said to get in the way of our grasping or experiencing the poem's meaning; nor do they intend to do so.

That said, a good deal of poetry does seem to work in this way, and an awareness of this might not only inform our readings of poetry that closely adheres to the picture Prinz and Mandelbaum set forth, but may perhaps also shed light on poetry that refrains from doing so. One might take a similar attitude to Angela Leighton's suggestion, in her 'Poetry's Knowing: So What Do We Know?'; that whereas the tendency of philosophy is to achieve knowledge – that is, to make knowledge an object that can be packaged and passed on

to the reader – that of poetry is to depict, describe, or otherwise engage with the very processes by which knowledge is created: ‘If the purpose of philosophy is to extract that object [knowledge] from the verbal means of finding it, and so pass it on, the purpose of poetry is to play on the means and perhaps lose the object in the process.’ (p. 177) For Leighton, then, poetry is a matter of exploring the very concept of knowledge by prioritizing *knowing* as an activity:

[Poetry] necessarily pushes at the parameters of that word [‘knowing’], opening it up to include wondering, unknowing, not knowing, imagining, listening – activities which have something to do with how the mind works, but which mostly shed the burden of any obviously attainable object. [...] There is always still something to be known or understood beyond the content of a poem’s words. (pp. 177–78)

Leighton is not the only author here to note poetry’s tendency to focus more on the dynamics of mental activity than on the outcomes of mental processes. Lamarque, for instance, observes: ‘What a poem offers is not, usually, a single thought on its subject but a thought-process’ (p. 31). Indeed, much contemporary poetry might be accused of being obsessed with the workings of the human mind. But as Leighton’s discussion seems to imply, this obsession has a point: it draws attention to the danger that in abstracting knowledge as an end result away from the processes that lead to knowledge – processes that may include, as essential components, mental acts not typically conceived as acts of ‘knowing’ – we may be impoverishing our conception and understanding of what ‘knowledge’ consists in.

Questions of meaning, of course, inevitably give rise (particularly in philosophical contexts) to questions of truth. Central to Roger Scruton’s account in his ‘Poetry and Truth’ is the distinction between the prosaic and poetic uses of language. The former aims at expressing a clear propositional content, since its purpose is to ‘place in the reader’s mind a thought about something’. Prosaic language thus aims to eschew semantic density altogether, and can in principle be paraphrased without loss. Poetic language, by contrast, is literary (in the sense that its words are not mere conveyors of detachable meaning, but are of aesthetic interest in their own right), with the result that ‘The effect of poetry depends on the *way of telling*, or rather (to adapt a well-known distinction) on the *way of showing* what is told.’ (pp. 152–53) Once again, then, it is form-content unity (along with, perhaps, some related features) that characterizes the poem as a piece of linguistic machinery. But Scruton adds an additional element: poetry, he claims, must transfigure its subject matter, to show a part of the world in a different light and, in this way, reveal a kind of truth not otherwise accessible. ‘Poetry,’ he writes,

'bestows a kind of truth on its subject matter. Words that can be sincerely uttered show an experience that can be truly felt.' (p. 160)

Scruton's suggestion, and his overall account, are interesting, and the account is not unattractive. But it is, at times, frustratingly vague. What 'kind of truth' is it that poetry 'bestows', and how does it bestow it? 'The truth, even here,' Scruton tells us with reference to Rilke's ninth *Duino* elegy, 'the truth of the house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit tree and window, even the truth of pillar and tower, is a truth bestowed in the experience. Its measure is the depth with which these things can be taken into consciousness and made part of a life fully lived.' (p. 160) Again, this is suggestive but obscure; I don't know what kind of 'can' Scruton has in mind, or how to determine which experiences can be 'truly felt', or which things can be 'taken into consciousness and made part of a life fully lived'. (Would I have the answer if I knew what a 'life fully lived' was? Perhaps, but that too is not clear.) And without answers to these questions, I cannot really claim to understand the test of truthfulness that Scruton seems to be offering us.

Putting aside the concern about vagueness, one might also wonder whether the point is rather narrowly directed: is Scruton thinking of poetry in general here, or only of a certain type? Once again we are faced with the fact that there exist many different poets, different poetic practices, different poetries. Even if we agree that poetry is capable of transfiguring reality – and there will be some who resist that – *must* all poetry aim at doing so? Scruton asserts that a poem that does not transfigure its subject is not really poetry at all, but is rather 'merely rhetoric' (p. 154). But there are, at present, a great many kinds of poet trying to accomplish a great many kinds of thing; surely some of them, even some of those who might strike us as most 'radical' or 'experimental', might be trying to transfigure reality, but it seems unlikely that they are all pursuing that goal.

Scruton's essay is perhaps most profitably read in conjunction with two of the other contributions here: Sherrí Irvin's 'Unreadable Poems and How They Mean' and Alison Denham's 'Ethical Estrangement: Pictures, Poetry, and Epistemic Value'. One of the virtues of Irvin's essay is that it takes on precisely the sort of difficult case that makes trouble for accounts like Scruton's. Consider, for instance, the opening lines of Christina Mengert's '':

Is an axle's excavation  
an axiom's inversion

that muzzles  
the ventriloquist breath

of a nipple. The revolving door  
of its throat. (pp. 88–89)

Is such a poem trying to 'transfigure reality'? My own sense is that Mengert is far more interested in the linguistic surface of the poem – its 'visible core', to borrow a famous phrase from John Ashbery – than she is in the sort of picture Scruton has in mind, in which a poem is a vehicle to express our intuition of a deeper reality ('there is an "inner truth" to things,' he writes, 'and [...] this truth is bestowed by poetry' [p. 161]). Irvin's discussion attempts to suggest possible meanings for 'x'; and so establish it as a meaningful work, without distancing itself from this postmodern, language-centred sensibility, and also without relying heavily on the sort of narrative strategies typically employed on novels and other works of fiction. Indeed, poems like 'x' bring us back to Gibson's complaint that because philosophers of literature have focused almost entirely on narrative understanding, and hence on the novel, they have had little to say about the non-narrative strategies adopted by many poets. There is no obvious narrative in 'x' – and for that matter, no obvious logic; if we are to avoid relegating the troublesome text to the category of the meaningless, then, we will need to find a very different way of thinking about what meaning in a poem might be and how it might work. As Irvin explicitly notes, moreover, these troublesome, 'difficult' cases are highly significant in part because poems designated as 'unreadable' are often those that attempt to speak for marginalized populations or to express ideas whose straightforward expression is either discouraged or rendered impossible by the conventions and standards of mainstream literature.

One might, of course, simply bite the bullet when confronted with highly experimental or avant-garde poetry, insisting that art doesn't have to *mean* anything to have aesthetic value. Irvin, however, believes that at least in many cases we can get meaning out of difficult poems – so long as we remember that their resistance to being read in ordinary ways is, in an important sense, part of their meaning, part of what they are depicting or expressing. We 'do not need to revolutionize our strategies to appreciate unreadable poems,' she writes; 'we simply need to be willing to entertain a widening range of poetic purposes' (p. 106). In support of her claim she offers creative and very interesting readings of a pair of 'unreadable' poems by Christina Mengert and Gian Lombardo. She also acknowledges what will likely be a common objection to her position: isn't the range of meanings available to such poems very limited? Can a confusing poem do anything other than express the idea that the world is a confusing place? Irvin's response to this objection, in connection with Lombardo's poem 'Partial Rhythm, Primate Laughing', is both instructive and perceptive:

Our confusion is not generalized and free-floating; it is confusion within a particular domain, in which we contemplate the human condition in relation to our human and animal natures. We are directed to this domain by devices [in Lombardo's poem] such

as the imagery of parasols and tables juxtaposed with laughing, climbing primates. Our confusion here is not identical to other confusions [...]. (pp. 102–3)

This seems to me not only exactly right, but also significant in the way it renders salient a theme, or set of themes, that occurs repeatedly throughout the essays collected here. It looks back to Lamarque's remarks about 'the experience of finegrained content', while looking forward to Alison Denham's contribution, 'Ethical Estrangement: Pictures, Poetry, and Epistemic Value' (p. 31). Indeed, Denham's quite intriguing essay, much of which is concerned with a close reading and discussion of Paul Celan's poem, 'Psalm', could be seen as a sequel to Irvin's 'Unreadable Poems', an illustration of her claims, and a vindication of her idea that since human beings are plagued by a plethora of species of confusion, it is not the case that all confusing poems will end up meaning the same thing. The confusion expressed in 'Psalm', on Denham's reading, is rooted in 'ethical estrangement', an alienated, post-traumatic condition 'in which the basic framework of a person's evaluative worldview has been radically undermined' (p. 191). The main aim of Denham's essay is to illuminate how a poem that at first may seem resistant to interpretation can, in the light of the relevant background knowledge, 'give poetic voice to ethical estrangement' – and thereby to illuminate more generally how poetry expresses emotions and thoughts – but like Scruton, she is also interested in the relation between poetry and truth, and she ends her essay with an insightful discussion of that difficult question (p. 195).

Two of the remaining contributions, Tzachi Zamir's 'The Inner Paradise' and Richard Eldridge's "'To Think Exactly and Courageously": Poetry, Ingeborg Bachmann's Poetics, and her Bohemia Poem', also contain, as central elements, close readings of particular poems: Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the former case, Bachmann's 'Bohemia Lies by the Sea' in the latter. Eldridge's approach bears a certain similarity to Lamarque's, in that it frames its reading of Bachmann's poem with a general question about the value of poetry: 'What interests or needs does [the practice of poetry] serve? And exactly how do figuration, rhythm, and imaginative engagement in interaction with each other serve them?' (p. 235) These are significant questions, though it is not entirely clear to me how the proffered reading of 'Bohemia Lies by the Sea' answers them, and the general answer, which appears in the essay's brief final section, comes across as a bit vague and underdeveloped.

Zamir's essay is far too ambitious and complex – not to mention odd – to deal with adequately in a review of this sort. In many ways the most radical and surprising of the contributions offered here, 'The Inner Paradise' casts doubt on the very idea that poetry and philosophy might engage in a productive

relationship (and in doing so, at least implicitly suggests that the very existence of a book such as *The Philosophy of Poetry* can only be an error). The poetry Zamir has in mind is that of John Milton, in particular *Paradise Lost*; and the view of philosophy under consideration – according to which philosophy, in its reliance on reason, evidence, and argumentation, tends to lead us away from, rather than towards, truth and wisdom – is also Milton's. It is a view Zamir wants us to take seriously, though it is hard to tell why he thinks we should, aside from the fact that Milton held it; indeed, one almost senses that he thinks it would be contradictory, a betrayal of his own position, to offer reasons in support of this position, given that one of its core elements is the rejection of argumentative reason. The somewhat awkward position this puts Zamir in is compounded by the fact that he too often seems to fall back on uncharitable, unnecessarily restrictive stereotypes of what counts as philosophical thinking. (Or are these Milton's stereotypes? It's often difficult to tell when Zamir simply means to describe Milton's view, and when, and to what extent, he is endorsing the view as his own.) For all the confusion, however, there is much of value in the essay: Zamir's discussion of Milton's poetic techniques, and the ways these techniques are especially well suited for conveying the particular outlook expressed in the poem, is accomplished and perceptive. One learns not only about *Paradise Lost*, but also about how poems in general make use of formal techniques in order to embody thought.

'The Inner Paradise' is not the only essay in *The Philosophy of Poetry* to consider the vexed relationship between philosophy and poetry. Although Simon Blackburn acknowledges that the title of his 'Can an Analytic Philosopher Read Poetry?' is somewhat tongue in cheek, his interest is also in the tensions that seem to exist between the two disciplines it names. There are reasons, in Blackburn's view, philosophers may tend to misunderstand poetry, or approach it in the wrong way, or, for that matter, simply decide not to approach it at all. These reasons have largely to do with the dominance of what Blackburn calls 'the Fregean paradigm', which provides a 'rigid account of communication with [an] essentially static, hard, immobile imagery, a picture that erases both the speaker and the listener or reader', and so downplays or ignores 'context, purpose, background, memory and just about every empirical fact about either cognition or the use of language' (p. 120). A better approach – better not only for dealing with poetry, but also for engaging and coming to terms with the linguistic behaviour of human beings as they live their ordinary lives – would be more sensitive to and rooted in pragmatism, focusing less on propositions as objects whose sole aim was to embody truth and more on the diversity of uses to which language can be put and effects that speech acts can achieve. There are, it will be

noted, clear connections here not only with Blackburn's work in other areas, but also with some of the other essays in this volume. Readers will surely be reminded of Leighton when they encounter Blackburn's suggestion that, on a more pragmatic view of poetry, '[t]he emphasis is on process not product, with the poem seen as the catalyst for a process of listening, reading, and reflecting, rather than as the delivery of a final product' (p. 124). And he also echoes Irvin's idea that '[e]ven confusion and bewilderment might be valuable responses to a poem, if it succeeds in making us aware that things are indeed confusing and bewildering' (p. 124).

Blackburn does not put it in these terms, but to see language from the perspective of the Fregean paradigm is of course to view it as, ideally, transparent rather than opaque or dense. After all, philosophy – analytic philosophy, at any rate – is generally thought to be argumentative and to aim to convince, while poetry presumably has very different aims in mind. In 'The Dense and the Transparent: Reconciling Opposites', Ronald de Sousa, spurred in part by recent empirical work in psychology, suggests that we rethink the idea that convincing through argument is, or at any rate should be, the main goal of philosophy; when philosophy succeeds in changing minds, it often does so by articulating a persuasive vision, which is not, perhaps, too far from what much poetry does. The intent is not to entirely erase the distinction: de Sousa allows that semantic density signals a real difference between poetry and philosophy, and, like Blackburn, he notes, 'what passes for truth in philosophy is more strictly tied to propositions as truth-bearers, capable of being sufficiently insulated from their context of origin to be held universally'. But while acknowledging these differences, de Sousa wants nonetheless to offer considerations whose overall effect is to 'weaken the case for pure transparency as an invariable demand of philosophy' (p. 57).

De Sousa's discussion is consistently interesting, though to my mind not always convincing. At one point he advances the surprising thesis that one element common to poetry and philosophy is that both 'are reluctantly bound to language' (p. 40). The suggestion is that both poets and philosophers aspire to achieve or offer experiences or insights that are ineffable, and so transcend language. No doubt many poets and philosophers have at times felt frustration with the limits of language; still, it seems an overstatement to identify this as an attitude fundamental to practitioners of either discipline. My resistance to this idea is connected to my resistance to Prinz and Mandelbaum's claim about words as barriers to meaning; a person who sees words as necessarily distracting from what the poem is really about will almost inevitably long to be able to transcend words altogether so as to be able to somehow access the pure 'meanings' themselves.

But while I have some hesitations about some of his claims, and while de Sousa's essay feels somewhat inconclusive – the price it pays for being as reflective as argumentative, and for drawing on a wide array of sources and addressing itself to a broad set of questions – it is undeniably one of the richest and widest-ranging contributions here, and is well worth the reader's attention.

I have left another very strong contribution for the end. Anna Christina Soy Ribeiro's essay, 'The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems', is a standout in this collection, not only for its quality but also for its subject matter and approach. Most of the contributors to this volume think of poems primarily, and often almost exclusively, as written texts; this is, indeed, the common conception of the poem, at least in the contemporary Western world. But as Ribeiro points out, this is problematic, since 'the oral tradition is historically and numerically primary (oral poems came first, and there are many more of them than written poems)'; thus, she concludes, 'oral poems, rather than written ones, should be seen as paradigmatic' (p. 129). It seems possible to accept these claims and still wonder whether the conclusion follows – whether, that is, the oral conception must be seen as taking priority over the textual conception; after all, words change their meanings over time, and contemporary definitions often take priority solely in virtue of having achieved contemporary dominance. Still, it is certainly worth thinking about the ways in which philosophers' neglect of the very question, and the resulting habitual focus on the textual, has constrained and perhaps distorted their thinking about the nature of poetry. Ribeiro's essay, which proposes an ontological scheme that accommodates both oral and textual poems (and is, perhaps surprisingly, the only essay here that focuses on the ontological status of poems as artworks), is full of insights and shrewd, thoughtful observations; it is a fine example of what can happen when philosophers of literature manage to shake themselves free of constraining assumptions.

All in all, *The Philosophy of Poetry* is a reasonably rewarding anthology. At least some of the contributions will, I think, be of interest to pretty much any reader who is at all curious about possible intersections between philosophy and poetry. At the very least, one can say that the neglect of the topic, which Gibson bemoans in his introduction, has been considerably ameliorated by this volume. But the real value of the book may well lie in the future work it helps to prompt and inspire.

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