HEIDI CZERWIEC

Book review

WINDOWS AND DOORS: A POET READS LITERARY THEORY BY NATASHA SAJÉ
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More teachers of creative writing are rejecting the tiresome rift with literary theory, so I was excited by the publication late last year of Natasha Sajé’s collection of essays (many of which have appeared in other venues—APR, AWP Chronicle—in recent years) that seeks to bridge critical and creative divisions in poetry scholarship. Overall, I wasn’t disappointed: there’s much to admire, and Sajé’s considerations of poetic styles and strategies are coupled with intelligent but accessible explanations of the various critical frameworks at play. These essays are valuable for the individual writer but also as texts in either a poetry workshop or a poetics seminar.

The “poetics” essays do a fantastic job of linking concrete techniques to their theoretical implications. “Front-Loading Syntax” demonstrates how syntax reveals the interrelatedness of form and content in poetry; the discussion of the reader-response effect of hypotaxis versus parataxis is especially interesting. In “Gertrude Stein’s Granddaughters: A Reading of Surprise,” Sajé defines surprise as deliberate moments that seem spontaneous but are designed to surprise the reader, and notes that surprise can be used in subversive ways against the assumptions of the reader. This essay examines the work of four contemporary “granddaughters”—Jeanne Marie Beaumont, Mary Ruefle, Belle Waring, and Amy Gerstler—whom Sajé claims have inherited Stein’s ability to cultivate surprise via a sense of playfulness, postmodern without being pretentious. The excellent “Metonymy, the Neglected (but Necessary) Trope” distinguishes metonymy from the predominant metaphor, which works via comparisons that rely on assumed relationships and therefore seem more timeless and universal. Because metonymy makes substitutions by naming, it can fix a poem to a specific time or place, and Sajé argues that this very quality can reference a culture (often via capitalist branding) in order to critique that culture and can emphasize the play of language through our associations.

Several essays would be useful for teachers of creative writing as well: some of the content (etymology, prose poetry) might be adapted for more introductory classes, or the essays themselves could provoke more nuanced discussions for advanced classes. “Roots in Our Throats” describes how the numerous etymological sources of English allow poets to amplify meaning, sound, and even ideology and cultural change, through its post-structuralist slippage. (Also, there is a terrific poetry exercise suggested on page 6 that I plan to use myself.) Sajé catalogues the characteristics of the prose poem in “A Sexy New Animal” to illustrate how its brevity and speed combine with a propensity for the surreal and surprising to create subversive and unhegemonic effects. And “Dynamic Design” discusses strategies for ordering a manuscript of poetry—opening gestures, trajectory of poems, endings versus closure—with an eye toward inviting and engaging the reader.

While I was impressed overall with this collection, “Rhythm and Repetition in Free Verse” adds little to the ongoing discussion of free verse, and “Performance of the Lyric ‘I’” seems like retread of Lesley Wheeler’s Voicing American Poetry and Kate Sontag and David Graham’s After Confession, neither of which are cited in her notes.

The biggest problem I had with this book, though, is that, in asserting connections between poetry and literary criticism, Sajé seems to have a blind spot regarding poets who work in received form and narrative, who rarely appear in her extensive
examples. In particular, in “Narrative Poetry and Its (Dis)Contents,” she complains that Dick Allen, one of the founders in the 1980’s Expansive Poetry, mischaracterized the rest of contemporary poetry, but then Sajé proceeds to do the same to this aesthetic school, treating it as a movement fixed in time to its (admittedly conservative, white, male) origins and guilty of equating its goal of “accessibility” to commercialism simply because another founder, Dana Gioia, had worked in advertising.

I would like to have seen recognition and discussion of how it has evolved and even publically broken with its founders. Like many of the critically engaged poets she cites, these writers are using formal and narrative structures to interrogate and subvert readers’ expectations and create multi-voiced dialogic texts. Marilyn Nelson in her essay “Owning the Masters” describes how the oppressing culture’s forms can be used to critique the oppressor and does so in her shattering heroic crown of sonnets “A Wreath for Emmett Till.” Moira Egan subverts the nubile female object of the sonnet sequence, making herself and her menopause the subject-object of “Hot Flash Sonnets.” Former U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey employs form to create a collage of voices representing the complex history of race relations in America. And new invented forms like the Bop and Kwansaba emphasize a communal African-American voice over the voice of the individual poet.

While Sajé’s intelligent mind could have incorporated the critically subversive possibilities of received form and narrative, this seemingly conscious omission in Windows and Doors leaves room for more of us poets to discuss literary theory and contemporary poetry. This collection is excellent in many ways and will be useful to a variety of poets, teachers, and students. As I finished reading this book, I knew there’s more left to be said and explored.