

Justin Quinn, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism & Cold War Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

Early on in *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism & Cold War Poetry*, Justin Quinn likens the examination of Cold War era poetry and critical discourse exclusively within a national boundary to ‘trying to analyze how a bike is propelled by staring hard at only one pedal’ (39). Literary tradition develops in a complex transnational interaction, and this is rarely more apparent than in the undertheorised study of Cold War literature. Quinn, himself the product of a New Critical education, brings a refreshing perspective to transnational theory, deftly balancing the autonomy of literature as a discourse with the knowledge that its autonomy does not preclude the influence of political forces. The performance provides a model for future criticism.

Chapter One begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of the work. Following Stephen Clingan’s *The Grammar of Identity*, Quinn argues that transnational theory best enables us to understand literature in terms of its movement between cultures, a movement that in large part shapes the literary cultures of those involved. Quinn expands on Jahan Ramazani’s *A Transnational Poetics* to argue that poetic traditions have developed through the interaction between cultures. From here Quinn traces a fascinating history of the cultural responses to the Cold War, which ‘created a global zone for culture, with unprecedented speed and to an unprecedented extent’ (32). The Soviet insistence of ideology’s omnipresence and the need for an emancipatory literature of the proletariat prompted a reaction of apolitical aestheticism from American poets and critics. In the exchange of sanctioned art, the US and Czechoslovakia each developed a mutual desire for access to the other’s counter-cultural elements, and unofficial channels opened up for cultural transfer. Quinn then interprets Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘Poem’ and Osip Mandelstam’s ‘The Tartars, Uzbeks,’ both poems ‘about talking across borders in a time of trouble’ (61), within the specific contexts in which the former was written and in which the latter was translated into Czech. This interpretation demonstrates the necessity of bringing a transnational perspective to the poetry of the time.

This theme transitions well into the figure of Jan Zábřana, a poet and translator whose importance and ambiguous motivations in communist Czechoslovakia comprise the bulk of Chapter Two. Zábřana’s anthology of radical American poetry, *The Fifth Season*, was published in 1959 and presents a puzzling case. As Quinn notes, ‘an anthology lies somewhere between a literary artifact and literary criticism’ (70). Zábřana’s involvement in the work, which was intended to be a tool for the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and a brief passage in his afterword, which is explicitly Stalinist in its sympathies, seem to contradict all of his other writings and the historical evidence concerning Zábřana, whose parents were the victims of falsified charges of anticommunist treason. Quinn then lays out the arguments for a number of possibilities explaining Zábřana’s involvement, from a failure of integrity to a disguised critique of communist politics. One particularly compelling hypothesis suggests that by anthologising the work of talented poets such as Edwin Rolfe and Thomas McGrath, who were treated by the American critical establishment as mere ideologues, Zábřana exposed ‘the silent ideology sinewing apparent aestheticism’ in American critical discourse (82). Regardless of his motivation, Zábřana opened up lines of contact between American and Czech poetry that later proved inconvenient for the Czechoslovakian government. Quinn concludes the chapter with an

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incisive reading of two of Zábřana's own poems, which accomplish both 'full lyricism and detailed responsiveness to the protean political situation' (90).

Though Chapter Three is slightly less focused in its attentions, it begins with a figure in some ways analogous to Zábřana, A. Alvarez. Alvarez, whose 1962 anthology, *The New Poetry*, 'set the course of the poetic mainstream for at least two decades' (98), also played a pivotal role in both the transfer of Czech poetry into the anglophone world and the ways in which it was then understood. Once Alvarez becomes aware of Miroslav Holub, however, he fades into the periphery. Quinn then performs a difficult feat of critical acumen. Contradicting and correcting prevailing critical attitudes regarding Holub's poetry, Quinn explores both the political dimensions of Holub's apparently aesthetic decisions and the overlooked aesthetic surfaces of his oft-politicised poems. Holub believed that 'the language of science offered a model for poetic speech' (116), prioritising meaning over sound. Holub's 'instrumental approach to meaning' purposefully 'undid his poems' ties with the Czech language' and enabled his poems to travel transnationally with ease (115-6). Further, his use of the Beats, namely Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti – a connection Alvarez misguidedly tried to sever – allowed him to make oblique political commentary, inspired by their political engagement in opposition to an Alvarez-sanctioned, insular poetry that only used politics expressionistically. Yet, purely political readings are a mistake, as Quinn shows in the way anglophone reception of Holub's poetry immediately reduced it to mere anticommunist protest, something Holub both wrote in anticipation of and resented. In this way, 'the journey itself conditioned the work's reception' (133), revealing the inextricably transnational factors at play in the reception, translation, and even development of the work itself.

Such a revelation underlies the central argument of Chapter Four, that 'anglophone poems of the second half of the twentieth century cannot be understood without reference to faraway places of which we know little – like the countries of the Warsaw Pact' (143). Disappointingly, Quinn's transition from American critical discourse to an inclusion of the UK occurs in a parenthetical. He examines Derek Walcott and Joseph Brodsky's writings, finding them rooted in an aesthetic ideology that was favourable to the US. By contrast, Ginsberg 'displays the inventiveness of the poetic imagination in the face of terrible events, and thus offers a model of moral and political empowerment' (170). All of the aforementioned poets, however, have deeply transnational roots that existing scholarship has not adequately shown. Quinn expands on this theoretical blind spot in an admirably nuanced critique of Edward Said, whose initial neglect of the unique Cold War dynamic in *Culture and Imperialism* led to a fundamental misunderstanding of the motivations behind the 1950s New Critical aestheticism and thus a tendency of postcolonial theory to neglect the circumstances of its development. Finally, Quinn takes an ambivalent look at the figure of Seamus Heaney, who provides an example both of the limitations of kneejerk dismissal of aesthetic criticism and of the blindspots of literary criticism which does not account for transnational context. Quinn argues that 'movement was integral to [Heaney's] tradition. The tension between local knowledge and worldly scope animates Heaney's poetry throughout his career' (183). This observation ultimately illuminates the subtle conservative politics of Heaney's critical kinship with Walcott and Brodsky.

Quinn concludes with a reassertion of the necessity for poetry to be evaluated both as the subject of political influence and as its own discourse. *Between Two Fires* sets an example for the scholarship he solicits, as well as being a powerful demonstration of the need for

contemporary criticism to move beyond anachronistic nationalism in order to understand the global context in which culture operates.

Aidan Watson-Morris

University of Texas San Antonio