



## Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2023

Passeurs de la littérature des États-Unis en France,  
1917-1967 (2)

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New York, Routledge, 2021, 198 p., ISBN : 9780429200786 (e-book), £31.19.

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#### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/21000>

ISSN: 1765-2766

#### Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFA)

#### Electronic reference

Rachel Malkin, "Xavier Kalck, *Pluralism, Poetry, and Literacy: A Test of Reading and Interpretive Techniques*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2023, Online since 01 June 2023, connection on 05 July 2023.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/21000>

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# Xavier Kalck, *Pluralism, Poetry, and Literacy: A Test of Reading and Interpretive Techniques*

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Xavier Kalck, *Pluralism, Poetry, and Literacy: A Test of Reading and Interpretive Techniques*, New York, Routledge, 2021, 198 p., ISBN : 9780429200786 (e-book), £31.19.

- 1 The pluralism of Xavier Kalck's *Pluralism, Poetry, and Literacy* is principally hermeneutic pluralism. Beyond the idea that there is no single explanatory model by which to approach literary texts, Kalck's further claim is that "pluralism is born from interpretation" (2), and he sets out to demonstrate poetry's role, in particular, in "channelling a hermeneutically plural worldview" (3). While the more familiar associations of "pluralism" may be political ones, this sense of the term is less in focus here than the notion of an implicit ethics.
- 2 The book proceeds by means of an introduction, four chapters, and a brief conclusion, and each chapter proposes a hermeneutic stance. Chapter One addresses "The Meditative Reader" by way of St Augustine and the poet Robert Lax. Chapter Two, on "The Analytic Reader," follows a discussion of Wittgenstein, Cavell, and American pragmatist and post-pragmatist philosophy, with readings of Larry Eigner's distinctive verse. Chapter 3, which considers "The Diasporic Reader," explores the significance of the Jewish tradition of textual commentary, arriving at Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, and section 23 of his long poem A. The final chapter on "The Ecological Reader" exfoliates the legacies of the Horatian precept concerning literature's conjoined task to delight and instruct. The discussion takes in Sidney, Shelley, and Baudelaire, on the way to an examination of how Gary Snyder's poetics present "a

transformative encounter with the referential world outside the text which nonetheless requires the poem to function as the revelatory medium" (159), and a reading of Theodore Enslin's *Ranger*. This chapter complicates the apparent opposition of nature and culture; a characteristic gesture, since the book is interested in the dialectical and dialogical. The notion of the poem as a medium for insight, rather than simply a vehicle for representing ideas, is also key.

- 3 Although there are connections that facilitate the transitions between chapters, the approach to each one is immersive. This is reflected in the extensive bibliographies supplied for the discrete sections, which demonstrate the extent of Kalck's wide-ranging research. Each chapter begins with the establishment of an "interpretive background" that is designed to actively "guide and direct the interpretation" of the poems that follows (179). The book covers a great deal of ground, and these backgrounds are richly allusive, ranging from the medieval, through the renaissance, and romanticism, to the twentieth century. However, it is the readings that are the tests on which the book's hypothesis rests. As Kalck puts it, "social-historical criticism" needs to be complemented by "the precise lexical, prosodic and syntactic analysis of the literary material at hand, inasmuch as to read is always a transitive verb. Without a direct textual object, there is no reading practice to speak of" (6). Kalck's chosen poems must thus produce their effects in ways that can be demonstrated by such attentive close analysis, since for him the emphasis falls on what a poem leads a reader through, or allows her to arrive at, rather than on lenses through which to view texts in the abstract.
- 4 The four exercises in interpretation, and proposed types of reader, offer "accumulated perspectives" rather than extrapolations of one approach (131). However, some underlying principles provide throughlines for these "confidently fragile" (6) hermeneutic investigations; one of these is that poetry has a special place in relation to engendering an important kind of "reflectivity," one that we might miss by focussing, for example, on fiction (2-3). Another is that it might be possible to read with one's "whole self"—this aspiration is cast as a "key preoccupation" for Kalck's book (49). As such, reading (or the "literacy" of the title) is posited as an activity that is not primarily a professional proficiency, although this is one of its aspects, but as one that is related to the development of the self. The roots of the ideal of "reading with one's whole self" lie in religious exegesis and commentary, and in intersecting philosophical traditions (49). This starting point informs the ordering of the chapters, as Kalck explains: "if my four readers have a more or less equal share in this book, the meditative one did have to come first so as to lay the groundwork for the entire perspective" (179). This first chapter is important for understanding the book's proposed stakes, showing how St Augustine renders "the reader a prototype for the self-reflecting thinker" (8).
- 5 Kalck does not advocate for one proposed readerly stance over the others, but for deeply involved reading as such. On this view, the reading process "may be axiomatically pluralistic" (6). What he aims to convey by this is that "the experience of reading makes the interpretive nature of human consciousness manifest to itself" (6). In other words, the reader becomes aware of herself in the act of interpreting, and hence aware of the nature of interpretation. Although the book is pitched against the idea of a set of intellectual parameters that can be applied in all cases—against what Kalck calls the "univocal"—an approach to reading grounds the argument. Kalck proposes that reading is itself an experience, that one can become conscious of this

experience, and that some poems are concerned precisely with fostering such consciousness of the “existential” aspects of reading (179). In the introduction, Kalck characterises the poems he has chosen as ones that require “readers to question their interpretive practice from the very threshold of the text” (7). The book’s conclusion expands on this crucial reflexivity. When engaging with the work of his selected poets, Kalck argues, the reader is “asked to move from asking what the text means to asking what it means to be reading” (178).

- 6 *Pluralism, Poetry, and Literacy* is an ambitious and erudite project that puts twentieth-century American poetry in conversation with a diverse range of thought over an expansive timeframe. The book steps away from the convention of “paying tribute to the current state of research within one’s restricted field,” whether that field is poetics or contemporary Americanist literary studies, since Kalck’s goal is to position his enquiry on more open terrain than that of current disciplinary debates (5). However, there are ways in which his argument could potentially be brought into further conjunction with such fields without losing focus. For example, in delineating the distinctiveness of his aims, Kalck is fairly brief and elliptical about the debates he would prefer to set aside; some more elucidation might usefully outline the contours of his endeavour. Further, Kalck’s expertise lies in the field of North American poetry of the period from which his examples are drawn, and about which he is deeply informed. He makes a case for these examples as touchstones for his argument on the basis of their simplicity, what he casts as their readability, and their relative freshness to most approaching this book. Yet the poets of his study all belong to an American poetic lineage stemming from modernism, in particular the branch that runs through William Carlos Williams, Objectivism, and Black Mountain College, onwards. This choice could be acknowledged and contextualised more overtly in productive ways. Since there is much that these poets share aesthetically and otherwise, a stronger case could be made for the book’s logic of selection, which would also present the opportunity to address the limits of this grouping, and the possibilities for its extension. While the relation between the readings of poetry and the book’s larger framework could be sharper at times, the readings themselves are illuminating and subtle.
- 7 If this book aims to serve as a “defense of poetry” (1), it could also be called a philosophy-literature project, and Kalck’s range of reference includes the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, twentieth-century American philosophy, and post-structuralism. Given the book’s density, its complexity is for the most part deftly handled. The critical tone is authoritative, with Kalck leading the reader effectively through the intricacies of the backgrounds for the close readings to come. There are some moments when more concise expression and explanation would be beneficial, as well as a few places where further exfoliation, including of terminology and frameworks, could be useful. In Chapter Two, “The Analytic Reader,” for example, the term “ordinary language analysis” is used regarding that hypothetical reader’s potential mode of interpreting Eigner’s poetry (77). The idea of “ordinary language methodologies” (90) has an established meaning in philosophy, but it is not commonly used with the same, or a widely shared, sense of application in literary studies, although some critics have notably explored the aspects of ordinary language philosophy that might translate to that work. Also in this chapter, the distinctions, as well as the overlaps, between the senses in which Cavell uses the word “ordinary,” to which skepticism and reflexivity are so central, and the twentieth-century American

poetics of the everyday and vernacular, could perhaps be drawn out more explicitly for readers less familiar with these respective contexts.

- 8 The book's four chapters are linked throughout by the stance of "active reading," where reading is a process and an experience, not passive absorption (95). In the conclusion, which provides a useful reiteration of the book's approach, Kalck also speaks of the "willing reader" (178) in relation to poetry that asks the reader not simply to receive, but "to take part" (179). His hope is to open the path to further tests of reading for willing readers of his own text, and to increased awareness of interpretive pluralism and its potentials.

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**Subjects:** Recensions

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