

REVIEW

Robert Frost's political body. By Grzegorz Kość. Rochester: Camden House. 2014. 334 pages.

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As Bernd Herzogenrath (2010: 20) observes in his recent book, *An American Body/Politic*, over the last couple of decades there has been a considerable “boom in Body/Theory”, where the body became “one of the most analyzed topics of postmodern thought”. Feminist and cultural studies in particular have paved the way for the conception of the body as a site of political struggle and as a discursive construct; the various angles from which the topic has been viewed attest to its interpretive richness and heterogeneity. A broader list of body-related studies includes such works as *The body and society: Explorations in social theory* by Bryan S. Turner (1984); a collection *Body/Politics: Women and the discourses of science* (1990) edited by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth, *American bodies: Cultural histories of the physique* by Tim Armstrong; *Body matters: Leisure images and lifestyles* (1994) by Celia Brackenridge, the edited collection *Writing on the body: Female embodiment and feminist theory* (1997) by Kate Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, and *The consuming body* (1994) by Pasi Falk. And yet, as argued further by Herzogenrath, the traditional understanding of the metaphor of the Body Politic “has lost its currency... and with it the whole system of concepts developed in four centuries of [state] political thought. In the times of the decline of ‘grand narratives’ and ideologies, the idea of a unity called Body/Politic does not hold anymore. . The Body/Politic in its traditional sense has lost its appeal – it has become a dead metaphor” (2010: 253). Tapping into this critical and theoretical interest in the body, but counter-arguing that the sense of its politicized and socialized dimension has been exhausted, Grzegorz Kość offers a sustained and truly engaging philosophical contemplation of Robert Frost’s poetry and poetics. Taking the idea of the political body for his principle of coherence, the author of *Robert Frost's Political Body* shows that the metaphor resonates with other concerns of the poet’s work and his entire aesthetic programme.

Somewhat predictably, Kość's study situates the poet in a space between "the natural" and "the cultural," a frequent consideration among Frost's critics (see for example Mark Richardson's *The ordeal of Robert Frost* [1997], David Sander's *A divided poet* [2011]). However, the comprehensive, imaginative and interdisciplinary character of the author's inquiry into lesser known and under analyzed aspects of the poet's writing reconnects the materiality of the body to the social, material as well as political models and systems dominant in Frost's times, highlighting the extent to which this relation and its diverse representations inform the poet's entire thought and output. In the analysis, which consists of eight structurally related chapters, the author builds and expands the concept of the body politic, going beyond its more traditional perception as a universal metaphor or an image. Digging deep into Frost's *political imaginary* in its complex and multiple guises, and relating it very convincingly to the style and thematic content of his poetic and aesthetic writings, the author unravels the main attributes of Frost's ideal political body: integrity, order, restraint, authority, stability, dignity, charisma and the capacity for growth. Through a meticulous examination of Frost's notebooks, essays, poems as well as collections of various artefacts which reveal the poet's interest in presidential portraits, public monuments and collectible miniatures, Kość also demonstrates how productive it is to work and think through diverse materials and fields. This approach allows for the creation of rich resonances and exchanges between philosophy, political discourse, the visual arts, archaeology, natural and material sciences, biography and regional history.

Roland Barthes described the body as "that to the highest degree phantasmatic space" (1980: 65). As shown by Kość, in Frost's work the metaphor of the body is on the one hand related to figures of order, wholeness, organization, hierarchy and control – figures especially useful and important for the poet whose understanding of the poetic practice was that of "a stay against confusion" (Frost [1939] 1995: 777). On the other hand, however, as aptly argued by the author, this preference for figures of order and charismatic authority is counteracted with metaphors of disability and bodily deformation, suggestive of human weakness, softness, sensitivity, and signalling a potential for transgressive excess, self-indulgence and failure. These features nevertheless serve the poet to reaffirm the necessity of upholding the ideal of bodily coherence against the monstrous disintegration associated in his writings with left-liberalism. In a very nuanced and refreshing engagement with material culture as well as the political, social and philosophical contexts of Frost's era and region, the author discovers in the latter's oeuvre a recurrent "figure of an authoritative public body ... that personifies classical liberalism" (1). As shown by the author, Frost's considerations of the exchange between social, political, physical and individual bodies reveal his entire practice and diverse interests as discursive,

deeply informed by his milieu's and the nation's political traditions. His politicized aesthetic, rooted in the cultural and intellectual history of New England, suggests the blueprints of an ideal social structure that, as Kość's insightful and heavily substantiated argument proves, go beyond the temporal frame of the modernist period and speak to the larger notion of performed authority in all of American culture.

The book's thematic division reveals both the depth and the organic development of its individual parts. Kość moves from a discussion of the body's "shape" (Chapters 2–5), through its behaviour (Chapter 6), to the broader issue of the historical development of the authoritative body in Western culture, i.e. the transition from the sovereign body to the increasingly atomized bodies and societies in Frost's times (Chapter 7). These interconnected threads merge in the final, *tour-de-force* chapter which examines a famous sculptural representation of the poet's own body.

The book is not only well-structured, but – a rare achievement in specialized, highly focused studies of this kind – truly entertaining, delivered in a jargon-free and captivating style, where each subsequent part adds to a holistic and convincingly drawn picture of Frost's aesthetic and political order. The first chapter introduces a rich overview of the biographical, philosophical, cultural and political origins of Frost's conception of the body, tracing it back primarily to the intellectual and social traditions of New England. Here, Kość explores the Puritan ethos of the Republican subject, which promotes self-restraint and control, as well as certain formative experiences from the poet's childhood and youth (e.g. his father's struggle with physical frailty and the early stage of Frost's relationship with his future wife Elinor White). In subsequent parts, the author addresses a wide range of topics, such as Frost's critique of what he perceived as the ugliness of Mayan monuments; the poet's interest in Shelley's and Keats's concepts of the body, and his rejection of the former's feminine sensibility in favour of the latter's authoritative body; or the symbolic reading of the physical bodies of American presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft. Kość also engages with Frost's critical view of the 'monstrous' disability of Randolph Bourne, editor of *Seven Arts*, whose left-liberalism dismayed the poet and, finally, visual representations of the poet himself, in particular the famous bust by Aroldo du-Chêne de Vére which – as Kość proves in a sustained and well-supported argument – had profound significance for the poet's vision of the "poetic body".

The rich scope of Frost's bodily poetics unfolds methodically throughout this comprehensive study, and each subsequent chapter broadens our understanding of the poet's vision. In the last chapter, Kość ties all the strands of his compelling argument in a careful examination of artistic culture that shaped the poet's poetic identity. He draws our attention to the role of portraiture and

sculpture in Frost's aesthetic considerations, connecting the poet to a larger tradition of portrait poetry and modernist inter-art collaborations. In an imaginative reading of the frontispieces chosen by the poet to adorn the title pages in the American editions of his two collections *North of Boston* and *Mountain interval*, Kość proves that these images were far from mere decoration, intended to monumentalize an American classic. Rather, the author argues, they contain a visual synthesis of Frost's formal and conceptual choices, such as simplicity, integrity, proportion, moderation, self-containment, nobility or firmness, which, in turn, reflect the poet's ideal of the political body. The intermedial and inter-textual inclusiveness evident in this part of Kość's argument is truly impressive, expanding as it does the interplay of the body's signifying traces in Frost's oeuvre and demonstrating the inter-art absorptiveness of his aesthetic program.

What is of special value, equally for the new and the more informed readers of Frost's oeuvre, is Kość's fresh somatical readings of overly familiar classics such as "Stopping by woods on a snowy evening", "The road not taken", "Home burial" or "Mending wall", and lesser-known poems, which are here also afforded close and passionate treatment. A case in point is the reading of "The cow in apple time", where the cow becomes a grotesque, improper, and Rabelaisian body threatening the social order, or "In the home stretch", which Kość traces back to the legacy of the nineteenth-century portrait-poem. These texts are thus given new prominence in the light of Kość's insightful considerations of the poet's republican bodily politics and poetics. The interpretations show the intricate connections between the tone of Frost's voice, the form of his poems and what Kość calls "imaginative nodes" of the poet's writing, which often contain "flashes" of his bodily politics: for instance, the husband's grave-digging in "Home burial" is seen as ugly, ungraceful and thus objectionable, while "The road not taken" reveals Frost's penchant for a unified decisive body, and thus a deep need for a sense of order, self-restraint and stability. Despite a tendency to foreground visual and conceptual contrasts in the poet's use of somatic figuration, Kość's analyses are also sensitive towards the ironic voice in Frost's treatment of the body, which ultimately remains an opaque mask, a mystery and an often unreadable screen full of conflicting signs, as shown in the poems "Homology" or "Brown's descent," analysed in Chapter Six. Here the author argues that the indeterminacy of physical actions in those two poems correlates with "the ambiguity of written language", serving Frost as a "poetic lesson" (222) whose conclusion is that the "behavioural duplicity" can have both social and aesthetic use (225). Ultimately, Frost, filtered through the lens of his attitudes towards the human body, emerges not so much as a post-romantic Darwinian reader of nature or a benign pastoralist, but rather as a classical poet with a republican mind, valuing above all the authority of culturally reinforced order and form.

What this study also proves is that Kość is an imaginative and admirably careful researcher and reader of Frost's *Notebooks* (2006), neglected and unjustifiably dismissed by some of Frost's critics, but critical to a better understanding of the poet's politics, as Kość himself observes in the Introduction (5). There is much educational value and readerly reward in the author's "heavy reliance" on those materials as well as other documents, objects and subjects which he explores for a relevant comment and often illuminating discovery. The well-chosen illustrations which accompany the book – entailing satirical cartoons from the period, pages from Frost's notebooks, the poet's drawings, as well as photographs of diverse artworks whose aesthetic refractions shaped Frost's thinking – also prove to be rich and fascinating material in this comprehensive study. At times, however, the biographical sources, visuals and anecdotes informing the analysis seem to weigh too heavily on the author's engagements with the poems, pulling the interpretations in one direction and thus slightly reducing the symbolic inconclusiveness which characterizes Frost's poetic idiom.

The rich research methodologies, the meticulousness and enviable gusto with which Kość draws a picture of Frost's intellectual, aesthetic and political milieu make this book an inspirational, model example of contemporary criticism at the cross-roads of material culture, biography, politics and poetry.

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About the Author

Grzegorz Kość is an assistant professor at The University of Łódź, Poland. He has published on the postwar American poetry, in particular its political dimensions, in American poets as public figures, American photography and sculpture. He is the author of two books *Robert Lowell: Uncomfortable Epigone of the Grands Maitres* (2005) and *Robert Frost's Political Body* (2014). He is former President of the Robert Frost Society and co-editor of Robert Lowell's prose which is to come out in 2016.