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Przemysław Michalski

Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie

ORCID: 0000-0002-7751-1306

Eva Lilja, *Rhythm in Modern Poetry. An Essay in Cognitive Versification Studies*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2023, pp. 192.

A summary on the blurb informs the reader that this (exorbitantly expensive) study is a „pioneering work in cognitive versification studies, scrutinising the rhythmical means of free verse”. The author of this seminal work, which has already been hailed in some quarters as a „landmark book”, is prof. Eva Lilja, an eminent scholar in versification studies and professor emerita at the University of Gothenburg. Although the text often casts a backward glance at the versification patterns of the past and their individual trajectories within the poetic tradition of a given culture, its main focus is on „Modernism’s free versification [which] emanated out of an aspiration to strengthen meaning and reduce form, or at least the rules regarding form” (2). The long essay opens up various questions and offers insights galore, but its chief aim is to explore the intricate question of so-called embodied cognition; in other words, the correspondence between the rhythms of poetry and the (bio)rhythms of the human body. Consequently, the methodology employed by the author is that of cognitive poetics, and the study is indebted mainly to its founder, the great Reuven Tsur, in whose footsteps prof. Lilja follows.

Those who (mistakenly) believe that poetry is primarily about meaning and message, while vast arrays of poetic devices deployed by the poet are of secondary importance as their principal function is to serve as a kind of superfluous embellishment, will have their views seriously challenged by this excellent though demanding work. Perhaps its most important distinction is that it reminds us of something essential but easily forgotten: poems are integral organic structures where each element of the whole interacts with all the others. In other words, at

the risk of uttering a banality, a true poem is much more than the sum of its parts. The natural instinct of many readers is to focus primarily on the meaning, while the rhythmical nuances, metrical experiments, and auditory orchestration of the poetic text, secretly operating „under the surface”, are only half-consciously registered by the mind. These underlying traits of the poem elevate it above the pedestrian banality of (most) prose.

The book is divided into many chapters, sections, subsections, features, numerous charts, and diagrams, and, at times, can be rather difficult due to technical jargon. However, this potentially confusing arrangement is comprehensible after all because meticulous analyses of actual poems always complement the theoretical parts. Consequently, poems by T. S. Eliot, Leonard Cohen, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Seamus Heaney, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ted Hughes, and Paul Muldoon are specific examples of metrical patterns and experiments in versification. The discussion of Leonard Cohen's poem is particularly illuminating as it demonstrates how versification can modify our understanding of the text. In this case, how can a metrical foot of a certain kind support the literal meaning of the line while another may reveal its hidden potential for irony? It shows how the poem's richness hinges on the semantic cargo of each word and the intricate interplay between meaning and metre. The study implies that in true poetry, nothing is contingent, accidental, or redundant. No single element of the overall structure can be changed or removed without compromising the integrity of the whole. In other words, every alteration would be a diminishment. Good poetry is based on achieving homeostasis between music and meaning, sense and sound, a form of benevolent feedback loop with one always being determined by, but also actively determining, the other.

Prof. Lilja's investigations also remind us that the act of reading poetry cannot be reduced to a series of intellectual struggles with the bare semantics of the text, but the reader's sensibility should also be alive to its other aspects. A truly good poem registers on all the senses, not the mind alone. It is not to say that our engagement with poetry ought to be unintellectual. Quite the contrary, invoking many findings from cognitive studies (along with many other disciplines), the author describes how the experience of reading poetry is structured by the mind. To this end, she frequently employs the idea of „gestalt” to explore how the human brain works to absorb the challenging alterity of poetry and break it down into smaller chunks, thus rendering the poem „digestible” in the process of embodied cognition. Moreover, in several passages of the book, she draws our attention to the actual graphic form of the printed poem and its significance for its understanding, with the aural and the visual interanimating each other.

The particularly illuminating passages compare versification spans with the rhythms of the human body. There is no space to discuss technical specifics at length, but what emerges with great clarity from those investigations is that a genuinely satisfying encounter with the poem must be inscribed into the body's physicality since the „conditions of the body are imperative for what is possible to do with poetic rhythm” (117). Currently, if read at all, poetry is assimilated quietly

and passively. For the most part, it is an intimate individual experience, while in the past, it used to be a collective event that bonded the community, especially in the days of oral transmission. This study persuasively argues that, ideally, poetry should be perused and performed; that the boundaries separating recitation of poetry from walking, dancing, jumping, breathing, and other forms of its enactment all but dissolve in the presence of a well-written poem.

However, the individual encounter with poetry is also informed by the cultural context in which it occurs. That is why the book features brief diachronic excursions into the history of European versification, with comparisons between its various historical trajectories. Prof. Lilja explains why certain poetic forms have become extinct or languish in obscurity while others enjoy robust popularity in modern poetry despite their archaic pedigree. In this context, she examines a technically complex sonnet by the Irish poet Paul Muldoon and shows how time-honoured rules of the poetic craft are often „broken to favour signification” (124). In other words, her analysis demonstrates how a technically competent poet can modify old patterns to create something surprisingly new and original.

One should also add that this edition comes with high-quality photographs of works of art, dancing figures, paintings, sculptures, and some of the poems discussed by the author. They show how the idea of rhythm is expressed and embodied in other media of art.

In conclusion, it must be said that it would be pointless to pretend that *Rhythm in Modern Poetry* was written with a casual reader of poetry in mind. Its approach to the subject is consistently academic, the methods deployed are highly technical, and the use of a specialised lexicon (though never degenerating into needlessly complicated lingo) makes it challenging even for weathered readers of academic books on poetry. At the same time, while many will find the question of cognitive versification „forbiddingly” scholarly, devoted lovers of poetry are likely to be greatly enriched by this study. And for the relatively small circle of specialists in the area, it is a real treasure trove of essential insights into the intricacies of versification, all supported by many detailed analyses of metrical patterns employed in actual poems.

Abstract

Eva Lilja, *Rhythm in Modern Poetry. An Essay in Cognitive Versification Studies*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2023, pp. 192. [Book review]

Streszczenie

Eva Lilja, *Rhythm in Modern Poetry. An Essay in Cognitive Versification Studies*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2023, ss. 192. [recenzja]

Keywords: Eva Lilja, rhythm in modern poetry, versification, versification studies, cognitive studies

Słowa kluczowe: Eva Lilja, rytm w poezji nowoczesnej, wersyfikacja, wersologia, kognitywizm

Przemysław Michalski- PhD; studied at the Department of English at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (1990–1996). His master thesis concerned the problem of Kierkegaardian Notion of Despair in the Selected Poetry of T.S. Eliot (1996). In 2005, he defended his doctoral dissertation on the problem of mysticism in the Hopkin's poetry (*Elements of Mysticism in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Jagiellonian University, Cracow 2005). He is currently affiliated at the University of the National Education Commission, Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Modern Languages, Department of English, where he works as assistant professor. His main interests include comparative literature, literary criticism, modern religious poetry (metaphysical poetry), as well as parallels and intersections between literature, philosophy, and religion. E-mail: przemyslawmichalski@wp.pl