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Book Review of *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* by Joan Shelley Rubin. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 2007. Pp. 470. \$29.95.

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Joan Shelley Rubin's book announces its thesis with its title: it argues that poetry was not just enjoyable, but also somehow *useful*, to twentieth-century American readers. Like Rubin's first book, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992), this one is a readable synthesis, drawing primary and secondary sources together to forge a satisfyingly concrete narrative. The "history of the book" is a growth field among literary scholars, and Rubin uses its premises as her guide, assuming that readers make texts meaningful and that reading is a social act. Rubin organizes her discussion around representative historical anecdotes, but she opens her book with a more personal story: as her father lay dying, she read aloud to him from a poetry anthology, *Through Magic Casements* (1927), that her

father had loved in his youth. As she read, she realized that “the poems had taken on a function unrelated to their subject and structure: they had given me a way to cope with my distress at not knowing, in those pained circumstances, what to do” (p. 2). Exploring the function of popular poems thus becomes the aim of Rubin's study.

The book is divided into two sections. Part one describes how poetry was produced and marketed between 1880 and 1950, concentrating on how and why it was (or was not) popular. Part two turns to specific sites—schoolrooms, households, churches, summer camps—in which poetry flourished as a social art. This bipartite structure works well, because it reflects the different ways that poetry publishers and poetry readers used their materials. Publishing history in the 1920s, for instance, has little to do with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—and yet readers in the 1920s continued to recite him. One of this book's many strengths, then, is the way its lucid organizational structure contributes to its critique of “standard” literary periodization by producing two parallel accounts.

Each chapter in the first section revolves around an opposition or tension. “Seer and Sage,” for instance, identifies a paradox at the heart of the Emersonian “model poet,” who must be at once an esoteric individual and a democratic community builder. Rubin echoes Christoph Irmscher's recent insights about public poetry (*Longfellow Redux* [2006]) while making a broader point. American popular poets, she argues, could not and did not separate themselves from their audiences. In “Amateur and Professional,” Rubin extends this idea, exploring how nineteenth and early twentieth-century poets walked a thin line: on the one hand, they sought commercial visibility, unlike their high modernist successors; but on the other hand, they invited readers to identify closely with them. Readers responded to poetry by penning their own verses, sometimes in direct homage to their beloved authors who served as both “icons and friends” (p. 33).

Revising the old story of modernism's march, in which Ezra Pound rescues readers from the inane clutches of James Whitcomb Riley, Rubin describes American poetry as a changing field of cultural negotiation. Older poems coexisted with new work, and modernity reached the masses in fits and starts. The figure of Edna St. Vincent Millay, for example, was both *outré* and popular; marketed as a modernist, she wrote in largely traditional forms and managed to be a crossover hit adored in both Greenwich Village and Greenwich, Connecticut. High modernists like Pound are peripheral to the action, since in Rubin's revisionist view their disdain for audiences rendered them unusable to most readers. This focus on widely circulated poets mitigates—without overturning—the theory that poetry reading declined in the twentieth century. Perhaps the most useful aspect of the book's first section is its careful attention to the facts and figures of publishing history. Why didn't poetry sell? Or did it? Why were some poets popular, but not others? Rubin does not tackle these questions speculatively or even very analytically; instead, she provides documentary evidence (sales numbers, for instance) that shows how publishers and the public struggled to “place” poetry in the context of twentieth-century American life.

Having addressed publishing history, the book's second half turns to poetry's readers. In this section, the anecdotes become even livelier as Rubin evokes—through diaries, letters, fictional scenes, and first-hand accounts—the ways that people made poetry meaningful. Her overarching thesis throughout is that simply reading the texts of poems does not reveal their meanings; rather, to understand what poems mean, one must attend to the dialectical relationship between individuals and

their social worlds. The first world that Rubin explores, in “Listen My Children,” is the schoolroom. In *Schoolroom Poets* (2005), I argued that nineteenth-century people first learned to recite poetry in school, and thus for many adults the meanings of “best-loved” poems were bound up with their memories of childhood. Rubin extends the schoolroom tradition through the interwar period and into the 1950s, exploring the choric speech craze, the impact of Sigmund Freud on theories of child development, and the trickle-down effect of the New Criticism on literary pedagogy. She shows that even after the “schoolroom poets” died, their cultural work continued and evolved.

The next chapter, “I Am an American,” traces the closely related practice of assimilating immigrants through pageants, settlement house activities, wartime propaganda efforts, and citizenship handbooks that linked poetry reading to civic engagement. Two central points surface in these chapters: first, that all reading (even silent reading) is socially conditioned, albeit not fully determined; and second, that poetry-reading patterns among ordinary people do not necessarily reflect the divisions (nineteenth vs. twentieth century, lowbrow vs. highbrow vs. middlebrow) that critics have imposed on literary history. This is a useful insight, not just for literary historians in general, but also in light of Rubin's earlier work, with its emphasis on cultural hierarchies.

While many historians and critics have explored the relationship between modernism and domesticity—see, for instance, Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (1991)—the nexus of modernism, domesticity, and popular poetry has been largely overlooked. As Rubin shows, the home was a key site, not just for poetry reading but also for negotiating and moderating, *through poetry*, the shock of the new. Moreover, poetry took on extraliterary duties in the domestic sphere, serving to cement affective bonds between parents, children, friends, and lovers. Such affective bonds even extended to poets themselves, as Rubin shows in an extended discussion of Carl Sandburg's fan mail. As a Texas woman put it in the late 1920s, “You have spoken to me individually in the loneliness of my heart and I have found in your sympathy, [the] understanding and encouragement to go on telling the story of my kind of people” (p. 284).

Rubin's examination of religious poetry readers, in “God's in His Heaven,” further illustrates her point that a poem's meaning is social and contextual. For instance, the Baptist missionary Isabel Crawford kept voluminous scrapbook/diaries, compiling verses by Millay, Edgar Guest, and Longfellow and “giving them new meaning as sources for the renewal of her Christian commitments” (p. 306). Moreover, like other religious diarists, Crawford did not reject literary modernity but rather integrated it into her genteel, Protestant worldview. An even more striking example of religious appropriation emerges in Rubin's discussion of “poetry as prayer in Reform Judaism” (p. 329). In the mid-to-late twentieth century, Reform prayer books incorporated, and sacralized, secular poems by authors such as Stephen Spender and Anthony Hecht. The meanings of these poets' words were thus utterly transformed by their new institutional context as part of a worship service.

Rubin avoids quoting extensively from poems or analyzing their contents, partly to underline her point that meanings are not generated by texts alone, and partly because she is deliberately writing cultural, not literary, history. Unlike many academic writers, she understands that one cannot focus on everything. However, by the end of the book poetry lovers might begin to feel that they are listening to an art history lecture without the slides. It is thus a joy when Rubin opens her final full chapter, on outdoor poetry, with a brief and brilliant analysis of Joyce Kilmer's “Trees.” She argues that the poem

poses a central question regarding poetry's use-value; to wit, what is the relationship between poetry reading and lived experience? Through descriptions of John Burroughs, cowboy poetry, and formal camping activities, Rubin traces the tension between outdoor poetry and nature, reflecting the anxieties about overcivilization described by Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism in the Transformation of American Culture* (1981). Poetry became both a way to appreciate the outdoors and a potential impediment to real life. Here Rubin hits upon one of poetry's central limitations as a cultural bellwether: even "popular" poetry appeals to a certain subset of people—the bookish types who recite around the campfire while everyone else goes swimming. Given the anti-intellectual strains in American culture, even mainstream poetry is, in some sense, marginal.

"It would be easy," Rubin concedes in a coda, "to see the history of poetry reading in America as a story of decline and fall" (p. 381). Instead, she offers a more mixed assessment, based on the responses to Robert Pinsky's 1997 "favorite poems project," in which he asked Americans to explain why they loved a particular poem. Strikingly, people's accounts involved not just interpreting poems but also remaking their meanings; a student nurse, for instance, saw her patients' pain reflected in Edgar Allan Poe's "Dream within a Dream" (pp. 402–403). Even today, then, poems work as "songs of ourselves" and repositories of our memories and our hopes. Or at least, they work that way outside of college classroom settings, which should raise serious pedagogical questions for those of us who teach poetry. Are we helping our students to love poetry, and if we are not, should we be? Is the main cultural work of poetry more affective than intellectual?

This book deserves a wide audience, both within academia and outside of it. It is a scrupulously professional piece of scholarship, but it is also animated by Rubin's personal enthusiasm for poetry. Like many books that straddle the academic/popular fence, it does present some minor frustrations for scholars. There is no bibliography, and while Rubin's avoidance of academic hairsplitting makes her book more readable, it can also make it hard to trace whose ideas are being used or refuted at any given point. Moreover, cultural critics are privileged over literary historians, so that some recent work goes unused or underused. Thus Rubin identifies the "girl poet" as a phenomenon of the 1920s, but in fact this is an old pattern in American literary history, dating back to at least the 1820s, as Mary Loeffelholz points out in *From Schoolroom to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (2004). Rubin footnotes Loeffelholz but does not take advantage of her insights. Other books, such as Mary Louise Kete's *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (2000), are entirely overlooked, even though Kete's discussion of poetry scrapbooks and affective bonds would surely contribute to the historical depth of Rubin's analysis. However, my complaints are themselves in the tradition of academic hairsplitting, and Rubin writes fluently precisely because she chooses to streamline her story.

Ultimately, this is a thrilling, sweeping overview of how—and why—poetry mattered (and still matters) to its readers. At the same time, it moves far beyond the "history of the book" as it grapples with the shifting relationships among individuals, texts, and institutions. Moreover, in our era of so-called culture wars, it is refreshing to be reminded that most people read for pleasure, not ideology. Early twentieth-century modernists fought anti-modernists in the pages of *Poetry* magazine, but ordinary readers blithely crossed the battle lines to read what they loved.