

also have been richer in photographic reproductions, particularly when discussed in the text (341, 352). For an author evidently well acquainted with Polish, Ukrainian, Belarussian, and American archives, Kuźma-Markowska offers a rather modest indication of the needs and possibilities of further research on American philanthropy, suggesting instead a closer look at the penetration of American popular culture in contemporary Poland. Yet these omissions do not diminish the overall high value of this well-conceived monograph based on rich primary sources. Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska paid due tribute to the generous and tireless efforts of many American institutions and individuals who helped the most vulnerable members of Polish society in the time of greatest need. She met the challenge of doing humanitarian history described by Yves Denéchère as the necessity of combining “social history, political history, history of international relations, but also cultural history and history of mentalities” (6). She achieved it by intertwining political, economic, class, ethnic, and gender reasoning. She made a valuable contribution to the dynamically developing studies on modern international humanitarianism. Hers is also a timely and valuable historiographic response to the current interest in the American humanitarian activities as a form of pursuing specific political objectives by the US governments and the heralded decline of principled humanitarianism.

### Work Cited

Denéchère, Yves. “Eastern Europe: A new Field of Humanitarian History.” *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 5.2 (2014): 5-11. Print.

Irmína Wawrzyczek  
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin

**Nikki Skillman. *The Lyric in the Age of the Brain*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016. 352 pages.**

Many know that love, in its early stage, releases neurotransmitters identical with those released by regular addictive drugs. Most others suspect it, without knowing exactly or even roughly how it works. Regular craving for new love will not get us into an addiction recovery center, although, from the biological point of view, it is unclear exactly why it won't. Love is missed in the same way as a shot of opium. The materialism of the mind sciences is inherent in so much of the present discourse. Although it doesn't exactly occupy our mind, it structures our intuitive understanding of our condition and our moods.

Nikki Skillman, currently an Assistant Professor of English at Indiana University Bloomington, had quite a brilliant idea to explore how the biological, physiological, and neuroscientific descriptions of the mind—accounts of the machinery of reason, emotion, grief, memory, love—have impacted the lyrical poetry whose very domain has been traditionally these emotions. While one would expect poets to resist the notion of mind thoroughly embodied, Skillman finds them in fact

“exhibit[ing] a common faith in mechanistic interpretations of mind” (4). They share in the philosophical consensus that the mind is in fact the brain. Postwar American poets, she says, are, on the whole, “deferential witnesses to the explanatory power of science” (4). At the same time, the critic shows postmodern poets to insist on human mystery regardless, and to variously to this biologization of human life.

The critic finds this paradigm dominating, for instance, the work of Robert Lowell. First, Skillman demonstrates how the mechanistic metaphors for the mind are central to Lowell’s high confessional mode. Her example is, not surprisingly, “The Neo-Classical Urn” from *For the Union Dead* (1964), a poem which is greatly illustrative of the biologist understanding of the mind; it exemplifies “verse not as an inspired vehicle of the immaterial soul but as a hollow counterpart to the inanimate parts that somehow anchor human wholes” (51). To quote her quote from Lowell’s famous lyric,

I rub my head and find a turtle shell  
stuck on a pole,  
each hair electrical  
with charges, and the juice alive  
with ferment. Bubbles drive  
the motor, always purposeful... (51)

Paradoxically, seen as classically confessional, this poem puts into question the very epistemological grounds of the confessional mode. But Lowell’s most dramatic and radical reaction to the growing domination of the biologist paradigm came a few years afterwards. In 1967 he was put on lithium which suspended the endless circles of mania and depression that led to his annual hospitalizations between 1957 and 1966. Robert Giroux rather famously recalled how Lowell underwent a crisis when told that his constant swaying between mania and depression could be fixed simply with a little bit of lithium carbonate taken in pills. In fact, he and his loved ones would have been spared so much of suffering, had the drug been discovered earlier. “It’s terrible,” he reportedly told Giroux, “to think that all I’ve suffered, and all the suffering I’ve caused, might have arisen from the lack of a little salt in my brain” (60). The lithium led him to radically renew his writing in his experimental volumes *Notebook 1967–68* (1969) and *Notebook* (1970). In Skillman’s view, those two volumes advance “a form that depicts the chaos of inner life as an expression of chemical accident” (50). She then offers a dramatic and persuasive account of how, after he had a relapse, he lost confidence both in the cure and in his poetic mission.

Robert Creeley, too, in his own way, quickly moved to poetry that subscribed to the biological materialism dominating our understanding of the mind. In his case, the change came with his recreational use of LSD in the early 1960s. In the 1950s, he still worked under the assumption there is an unbridgeable duality between the body and the mind, something that, as he said in an interview, made poetry writing feel like an “awful” “torque” (89). His volume *For Love: Poems 1950–1960* (1962), Skillman writes, was “cripplingly” self-conscious and systematically denigrating the body. The year 1963, however, marks a significant transition to poetry showing the mind to consist of progressing-through-time motions of consciousness determined by

physiological moods and the contingencies of language. His poem “I Keep to Myself Such Measures...” (1963) still seems to arise from a unified “I” but is no longer a torque of conflict of the mind and the body. It represents a far stabler motion of thought through time. Creeley’s poetry, in the wake of William Carlos Williams, sustainedly arose from his modern understanding of the mind; it registers the process of thinking as unfolding in real time, biologically condition and also guided by string of words on the page (101).

Skillman then includes analogous sketches on the neurologist discourse as underlying A. R. Ammons’s poetic thought, James Merrill’s understanding of memory and its failures, and John Ashbery’s account of attention. It seems that none of the different modes of mental life has escaped physiological descriptions or framing in the important American poetry of the last 70 years.

Jorie Graham, too, has been deeply involved in the physiologist paradigm in the understanding of the human mind. Skillman traces this interest to her friendship with Antonio Damasio, the chair of the neurology department at the University of Iowa in 1990s. Still, Graham has been concerned that the biological determinism inherent in the paradigm uselessly undermines our appreciation of social and interpersonal responsibilities (220). In this best chapter of her book, Skillman shows Graham’s work as stemming from her conviction that poetry should both avoid the old illusions and yet fulfill its special mission and obligation to balance off biological cognitivism with the reassertion of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” (207). She both asserts the physiologist mode and opposes it. In the late 1980s and 1990s Graham begins to use underlined blank spaces. Combined with mathematical variables, they reaffirm gaps and mysteries in human vision and understanding. Skillman argues that Graham’s poetry identifies blind spots of human empiricism. In her poem “Subjectivity,” for instance, from her volume *Materialism* (1996), a dead monarch butterfly, an archetypal symbol of the mind, is a subject of intense inquiry. Closely scrutinized by the speaker, its wholeness eludes description; inserted among the symbolic pages of a book, it would become flat:

as if it were still too plural, too  
shade-giving, where the mind needs it  
so flat (218)

After five rich chapters discussing individual poets, Skillman’s inquiry accelerates toward the end. In “Conclusion,” subtitled “Anti-Lyric in the Age of the Brain,” she more cursorily but effectively reviews a number of more recent poetic projects—like that by Tan Lin (b. 1957), Juliana Spahr (b. 1966), David Buuck, Haryette Mullen (b. 1953), and Christian Bök (b. 1966)—as seeking to deconstruct human subjectivity, demystify the deep poetic self and to accommodate the “intentionless, emotionless quanta of anatomical being” into their sense being alive (240). Their aims, she argues, are usually contradictory and paradoxical. Charting thoroughly embodied cognition as they do, they also—in Skillman’s own words—“assert the perseverance of hobgoblin immaterialities (creativity, originality, emotion, voice)” (241). Her one engaging example is *An Army of Lovers* (2013) by Juliana Spahr and David Buuck, an anti-lyric prose narrative exploring the impasse which two characters, the two

fictionalized authors, Demented Panda and Koki, have found themselves in. The two collaborating poets are disgusted with the egotism of the traditional lyric and yet would like to find a mode which would, within a larger anti-lyric skepticism, allow them to preserve emotional agency (253-54).

Nikki Skillman wrote an important and insightful book. Filled with effective readings, lucidly argued, and exuberantly written, it's now the most important single book-length analysis of this key aspect of contemporary lyric. Importantly, her approach helps bridge a deep divide between confessional poetry and the more language-centered poetic modes.

Grzegorz Kość  
University of Warsaw

**Kacper Bartczak, ed. *Poeci Szkoły Nowojorskiej* [The Poets of the New York School]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2018. 364 pages.**

In his editorial introduction to a recent volume in the series *Mistrzowie Literatury Amerykańskiej* (*Masters of American Literature*), Kacper Bartczak ponders what the New York School of poetry was and what it is now, thus placing his critical discussion in a historical context and unveiling recurrent classification problems. Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and Kenneth Koch—whose work is explored in this book—never identified as members of the New York School, never expressed a desire for artistic affiliation, and never sketched any group manifesto. As Ashbery elucidated, “this label was foisted upon us by a man named John Bernard Myers, who ran the Tibor de Nagy Gallery.... I don't think we were ever a school.... We were a bunch of poets who happened to know each other; we would get together and read our poems to each other and sometimes we would write collaborations” (*The Paris Review Interviews* 182).

The book edited by Kacper Bartczak constitutes an important and nuanced response to those classification dilemmas. Unlike David Lehman, who coined the term “the last avant-garde” to argue that the New York School poets (except Guest whom he excluded from his study) were “the last authentic avant-garde movement that we had in American poetry” (1), the authors of the essays collected in this volume avoid grandiose statements about the role of this casually formed “school” in the history of North American avant-gardes. Instead of atomizing distinctive features of New York School poetics, they highlight the overlapping aesthetic impulses, tendencies, and interests that bring this “bunch of poets who happened to know each other” together. In the present volume, the New York School emerges as an ephemeral “event,” propelled by artistic encounters and exchanges between Schuyler, O'Hara, Ashbery, Koch, and Guest. Importantly, Bartczak argues that what consolidates the group is a shared attempt at “integrating the poem with a real, material-psychological and context-based event.” This integrative effort also “generates the event itself, in a way both surprising and unpredictable for its participants” (9). Paradoxically, however, such organic welding