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The Cuckoo (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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The Cuckoo by Peter Streckfus Introduction by Louise Glück Yale University Press, 2004, 80 pp., \$25 (cloth), \$13 (paper)

The 2003 Yale Series of Younger Poets winner, *The Cuckoo*, by Peter Streckfus, is the choice of Louise Glück, judge of last year's contest. The book jacket heralds the collection as "daring," alluding to Streckfus's willingness to fuse traditional narrative and lyric modes with more experimental techniques. Although Glück's choice may initially surprise readers, marking as it does a departure from the style generally favored by one of the most prestigious prizes in American poetry, closer examination of *The Cuckoo* yields an explanation.

One of Streckfus's central motifs is the journey, or quest. The emphasis on archetypes and myth is also central in much of Glück's own writing. In particular, Streckfus works with the story of the Buddhist monk Hsüan-tsang and his fifteen-year journey to India and back. Two of the longer poems engage Anthony Yu's translation of the sixteenth-century novel *The Journey to the West*, a fictional account of the monk's travels. Indeed, *The Cuckoo*'s final long poem, "Organum," is wholly composed of language from the novel and Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*. This meshing of different journeys on different continents privileges the metaphor of the journey over any specific trip and is echoed in other poems throughout the collection, such as "The English," which alludes to the story of Robinson Crusoe.

The first poem in the collection "teaches" readers how to read the rest of the poems, in many ways. "The English" consists of a brief, imagined dialogue between Crusoe and Friday.

Crusoe: A bee.

Friday: Bee?

C: Aye, a bee.

F: Bee . . .

C: Aye.

later . . .

C: City.

F: Cee Dee

Here, two speakers apparently miscommunicate, resulting in a nonsensical exchange. And yet, from the start, Streckfus argues strongly for the sense of such nonsense. As Glück says in her introduction, "the case for nonsense is not the same as the case against meaning. It belongs, in literature, to the holy fool." Friday gleans from Crusoe's few words the English alphabet itself, the fundamentals of another language. And Crusoe fails to see Friday's brilliance, correcting his pronunciation [End Page 199] instead of seeing what Friday is actually doing. The poem suggests one of the strengths of *The Cuckoo*: there is an authenticity to Streckfus's vision that elevates such language play above the level of gimmick. The poem also illustrates the poet's interest in combining the historical and the imaginary.

Despite Glück's praise that "the quotidian, the social, impinge very little" in this book, I can't help but long for the balancing virtues of the everyday. Streckfus's appropriations of original sources are deftly handled, yet the project he has set for himself often prohibits him from exploring the social implications of their original contexts. But these are small complaints in the face of all the book accomplishes. *The Cuckoo* is a deserving recipient of the prize. Perhaps it will open the door for experimental writing to enjoy a more mainstream poetry audience. As Streckfus says, "You are in the boat my little skipperoo, my kitzie koodle. . . . Come on now, you have no choice. Trust me." It is hard not to.

book, which ten years ago led to appearances on the *Today Show*, *Oprah*, CNN and *Fresh Air*. When she read from her book, Lucy barely tolerated the cancer survivors in the audience who would try to one-up her account of suffering or give their reports "from the suffering sweepstakes." She hated the phrase "survival of the human spirit." *Autobiography of a Face*, an unsentimental, tough work of art, transcends cancer in favor of something more—a quest for truth and beauty. (KS)

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by Peter Streckfus

Introduction by Louise Glück

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