

Greaney, Patrick. *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 227 pp. \$25.00 paperback.

Reflections on power are surely relevant to any discussion about representations of poverty. In the field of the visual arts, documentary photographers, such as Jacob Riis, whose photographs of 19th-century New York tenement life were taken with the goal of bringing about social reform, have been criticized for their condescending, disempowering attitude towards their impoverished subjects (see Matthew Power, "The Other Half." *New York Times*. May 25, 2008). At the same time, these photographic representations of the poor have an effect that exceeds the photographer's intentions, and can be seen even now as lending a certain power and dignity to people who had until then remained invisible. In literary representations, writers engage with similar issues as they describe encounters with the poor, whom they often portray as powerless and powerful at the same time. Patrick Greaney's *Untimely Beggar*, which traces representations of the poor in French and German literature from the 19th to the early 20th century, is an important contribution to a vital but neglected area of study. Greaney's analyses of representations of the poor in works by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rilke, and Brecht, in light of philosophical and theoretical approaches to power and disempowerment (in Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Benjamin, among others), engage with the key issues of poverty and power in ways that augment our appreciation and understanding of the literary works.

The book's opening chapter contains a section on Marx which analyzes this thinker's hesitation to categorize the poor as either part of the proletariat or as another identifiable social class. Greaney correctly points out that Marx's recognition of the potential revolutionary power residing in the disempowered classes resonated with writers of fiction and poetry, who represent this potential inherent in the powerless through literary devices that Greaney elucidates in later chapters.

The strength of the following chapters resides in Greaney's close analysis of literary language in texts by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rilke and Brecht that represent the poor. The chapter on Baudelaire focuses on several of the author's poems and *poèmes en prose* that detail encounters with the poor and that, through violent contact, open up new possibilities by reversing the power relationship between author and subject. In the chapter on Mallarmé, Greaney also argues that the voicelessness of the beggar is depicted not as powerlessness but as potential for receiving, in addition to money, a new relationship to language.

The book's two chapters on Rilke are particularly strong. The first focuses on the poems of *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*, from the collection *Das Stundenbuch*. Greaney challenges the typical interpretation of Rilke's poetry as aestheticizing the poor, and instead points out that the collection is "a complex testament to the difficulty of representing poverty at all" (115). The next chapter on *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* argues, also quite convincingly, against the usual interpretation of the novel as turning away from the unsettling encounters with the poor and outcasts in its second part, focused on the narrator's childhood and reflections about love. Instead, Greaney shows the continuity between the two parts, which both develop the notion of identity as a series of shifting personae, based on encounters with others (outcasts). Greaney refers, in his readings of Rilke, to Nietzsche's notion of poverty as both linked and oppositional to the ascetic ideal.

The final chapter, on Benjamin and Brecht, moves away from Greaney's previous focus on encounters with socioeconomic poverty and instead broadens the definition of impoverishment to include "the exposure of the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior by glass architecture and the reduction of the dramatic and poetic subject in Brecht" (147). These concerns, though important to the interpretation of works by Benjamin and Brecht, seem to bear little relationship to the material mentioned previously on literary representations of the poor. This lack of focus in the final chapter points to a more general difficulty that I encountered in reading this book: I was not convinced that a link exists between literary depictions of the poor and Greaney's notion of "impoverished language," which seems unrelated to actual poverty and instead could be seen as a characteristic of poetic or literary language more generally. For example, Rilke's valuation of potentiality as opposed to actuality through the use of simile and metaphor appears throughout his work; and what Greaney terms the "privative aspects" of Mallarmé's writing are arguably part of his general aesthetic, not necessarily related to the issue of poverty. Fortunately, this lack of clarity surrounding the notion of "impoverished language" does not detract from Greaney's well-supported reflections on the relationship between poverty and power in literary texts.

Untimely Beggar is a valuable study of an important but previously neglected topic, potentially of interest to specialists and non-specialists alike. Its astute readings of literary texts on encounters with the poor provide thoughtful and original interpretations of authors writing in French and German during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

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Messling, Markus. *Pariser Orientlektüren. Zu Wilhelm von Humboldts Theorie der Schrift. Nebst der Erstedition des Briefwechsels zwischen Wilhelm von Humboldt und Jean-François Champollion le jeune (1824–1827)*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008. 406 pp. €44.90 hardcover.

This is an important book on more than one count. It offers first of all a path-breaking methodical assessment of Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of writing as it evolved from his intensive creative and critical encounter with the Parisian-centered French school of oriental studies in the first quarter of the 19th century in particular with the Egyptologist Jean-François Champollion and his method of deciphering the hieroglyphic writing system of ancient Egypt. Moreover, it makes exemplary use of Humboldt's recently rediscovered—but still largely unpublished—immense body of studies, materials, and scholarly correspondence that pertain to many of the world's major and minor languages, including those of Europe, Africa, Asia, the Austronesian language group of the Pacific and the Americas. These had been ignored throughout the 19th and most of the 20th century due to the predominance of a Eurocentric mainstream Indo-European linguistics. Humboldt's name has been notoriously absent in the debates of recent decades (prompted by Jacques Derrida's *De la Grammatologie*) about the importance of writing (*écriture*) for an understanding of language and culture and its