

Title: 'Approaching the limits of language'

Review of: Richard A. Nanian, *Plerosis/Kenosis: Poetic Language and its Energies*, Studies in Literary Criticism & Theory, Volume 22, Ed. Hans H. Rudnick (New York: Peter Lang, 2012). ISBN 9781433119361 (hbk.) £55

Author: Kim Patrick

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Warning against the seductive metaphor of text as artefact, Nanian asserts that the literary work lives. Moved by the desire to articulate his own reading experiences, Nanian seeks to detect poetic energies within the works of poets including Coleridge, Poe, and Eliot. Adopting the Greek-derived terms *plerosis/kenosis*, he devises extremes which support him in quantifying the extent to which a poem may force the reader in the direction of order and logic (*kenotic*) or disorder (*plerotic*).

Occupied by boundaries and limits, *Plerosis/Kenosis: Poetic Language and its Energies* considers the capacity of language. However, it is the capacity of language to fail. Nanian isolates such failures and finds that they may force the poet towards an inevitable silence or, in the case of Whitman's 'Song of Myself', stimulate innovation.

Nanian's initial overview of reader-response theory proves a brisk resource. Yet, for a critic resurrecting the text as artefact, he has quite the killer instinct in his survey of historical, philosophical, and critical contexts. From Iser to Kant, Nanian attacks to the verge of negating purpose. At best a curmudgeon, at times simply irreverent, his manner and seemingly endless dissatisfaction can be an unsettling distraction.

The introduction of Elizabeth Sewell's diagram of her spectrum perfect order/perfect disorder from *The Structure of Poetry* (1952) rewards perseverance and its appropriation marks the much anticipated introduction of Nanian's own *plerosis/kenosis* spectrum. An essential and elegant shift into *plerosis/kenosis* in practice offers a broad and ambitious application. Consideration of the Romantics dominates: Nanian's close reading of Keats's 'Lamia' and work on the sublime are of particular note. A tool for close readings that may offer new points of departure – especially to scholars of the Romantics – this work will prove, as Nanian intends, most useful in application.

Driven by a need to measure and determine, Nanian is himself seduced by mathematics, binaries, and polar terms. Overly manufactured and mechanical, his distance from the literary work itself is often vast and his sense of a 'reader' absent. Nanian's terms and intent are all too inviting. *Plerosis/Kenosis: Poetic Language and its Energies* does not, as might be expected, further our understanding of what it is to read, to encounter, or indeed experience poetry. However, Nanian does make a welcome and solid contribution to shifting our perceptions from what language *is* to what language is *doing* in poetry.