

# Cristiana Pagliarusco *Georgia O'Keeffe in Poetry: Offspring of an Icon*

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**Review of** Pagliarusco, Cristiana (2019). *Georgia O'Keeffe in Poetry: Offspring of an Icon*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 314 pp.

Word and image are kept in a close dialogue that empowers both in this elaborate essay by Cristiana Pagliarusco who pursues poems, that are “painted”, as she puts it, on Georgia O’Keeffe’s visual and verbal oeuvre. Within the field of studies on ekphrasis committed to the endless search for analogies between literature and painting, a search which – as Pietro Taravacci clearly underscores in *Ut pictura poesis* (Università di Trento, 2016) – has now overcome the classical rivalry between the two arts to focus rather on their mutual implications and explore intercultural poetics and aesthetics, this is the first scholarly work devoted to O’Keeffe. The SEMPER seminars in Trento were seminal for Pagliarusco’s work. Its scope is large: it considers eighty-eight poets and more than 500 poems on the artist. Its aim ambitious: it maps an affiliative (Edward Said) and affective (Leela Gandhi) system of artistic relations in order to foreground a profoundly humane and embodied community.

*Georgia O’Keeffe in Poetry* reflects on her paintings, her photographs, her writings and her 1976 autobiography, with the aim to capture the multiple and complex character of an artist who eschews any canonical domestication and whose courageous message continues to nourish manifold artistic forms, among them both US and international contemporary poetry. Pagliarusco puts next to each other Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Maxine Kumin, May Swenson, Christopher Buckley and Edward Hirsch, on the one hand, and Shurooq Amin, Sujata Bhatt, Kate Braid, Diane Wakoski, Richard Vargas, and Charles



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Tomlinson, on the other, to poignantly argue that O’Keeffe is “a rad-icant artist” in every way, capable of enduring also when she is being thwarted or uprooted with a persistence and strength that provoke, liberate, and transgress, and that often lead to qualify both her actions and her artefacts as feminist, although this is an adjective she would not herself appreciate: “Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest”, she states in her autobiography (*Georgia O’Keeffe*, New York: The Viking Press; Penguin Books, 1976, unpaginated).

Pagliarusco derives her definition of “radicant artist” from Nicolas Bourriaud, and employs it to highlight the reproductive character of the two-way intersections between visual and expressive languages. Her argument is supported by an inquiry which surfaces on the pages of this volume to display deep research and passionate devotion to the issues at stake. It is based on solid knowledge both of the field of the fine arts and of poetry. Consequently, the essay offers new perspectives both on O’Keeffe’s criticism and on contemporary poetry. The numerous poems taken into consideration may sometimes overwhelm the reader, but the overall purpose is always clear: Pagliarusco is tracing a possible artistic community whose main purpose is to show humans how to stay human, which, in Sujata Bhatt’s line from the poem “Cow’s Skull - Red, White and Blue” means to stay “imperfectly perfect” (121). When this purpose is embraced, the apparent lack of order easily translates into radical democratic organization, which can never be subordinated to order. The argument unfolds democratically: first the reader is offered the lyrical texts – related to places of O’Keeffe’s life, to her paintings, to her representations of human artifacts –, afterwards she is exposed to the existential meanings of the essence of things that the intangible holds and the artist and poet, as much as the reader, struggles to articulate.

This presentation, organized in a clear way that shows the development of an argument supported by numerous and precise textual references is noteworthy more conceptually than rhetorically. Equally remarkable is also the rigorous use of a methodology centered on the concept of the radicant, which allows Pagliarusco to follow the long and winding path traced both by the multiple facets of the artist O’Keeffe and by the numerous minor and major poetic voices selected, without ever losing track of the specificity of the questions addressed nor of the complexity of the themes inquired. The reader is walking on a path that constantly branches out and rigorously refuses to show the main road. The argument focused on the dialogue between literature and painting is dialogical through and through – a relational frame that keeps the right critical distance between close text analysis and cultural contextual evaluations, between intertextual and intratextual considerations, by carrying on an intersemiot-

ic reading that is focused on the question of the epistemic value of ekphrastic literary outputs. Of particular significance is the section devoted to the various spaces that characterize O'Keeffe's art and the speculations about how these inspire and provoke poets so widely different because of their origins and characteristics. The book emphasizes the influence that O'Keeffe's art had on poetry, especially on the interest for the object, the thing itself, for William Carlos Williams's theory of objectivism. In the process and in addition, the book also illuminates the lyrical aspects of O'Keeffe's art. This way, the book offers a map of a boundaryless community of artists who have crossed spaces and time, means of expression, and categorizations in order to share comparable attractions that open their petals like the many flowers painted by O'Keeffe. This community is gendered because it displays rather than assimilating the differences that compose it - Pagliarusco's feminist inquiry foregrounds the dialogue between femininity and masculinity in a democratic community that stems from the dialogue between different artistic languages and rejects disembodiment.

The vastness of *Georgia O'Keeffe in Poetry* is completed by an Appendix that provides basic information on O'Keeffe and the theoretical premises of this study, as well as an impressive bibliography, which includes biographies of the poets, some essential illustrations, and a tightly controlled number of footnotes. This organization and its smooth language make the book accessible also to a non-specialist audience and of interest to scholars in cultural studies. The quotations from the poems that constellate the book are a delight for everybody: they connect emotions and enable a sharing that is fed by O'Keeffe's fearless expression of her scientific and sensual observation of objects.

