



Echo and Critique

Poetry and the Clichés of Public Speech

FLORIAN GARGAILLO

In *Echo and Critique*, Florian Gargaillo skillfully charts the ways that poets have responded to the clichés of public speech from the start of the Second World War to the present. Beginning around 1939, many public intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic lamented that the political lexicon had become saturated with bureaucratic stock phrases such as “the fight for freedom,” “revenue enhancement,” and “service the target,” designed for the mass media and used to euphemize, obfuscate, and evade.

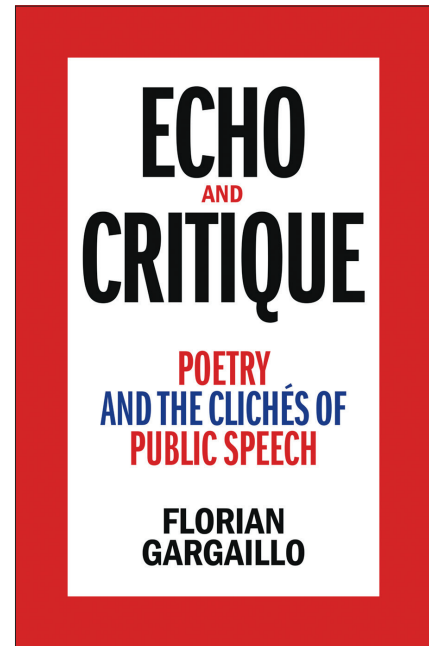
Instead of ridding their writing of such language, many poets parroted these tropes as a means of exploring the implications of such expressions, weighing their effects, and identifying the realities they distort and suppress. With its attentiveness to linguistic particulars, poetry proved especially well-suited to this innovative mode of close listening and intertextual commentary. At the same time, postwar poets recognized their own susceptibility to dead language, so that co-opting political clichés obliged them to scrutinize their writing and accept the inevitability of cant while simultaneously pushing against it.

This innovative study blends close readings with historical context as it traces the development of echo and critique in the work of seven poets who expertly deployed the method throughout their careers: W. H. Auden, Randall Jarrell, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Robert Lowell, Josephine Miles, and Seamus Heaney. Gargaillo’s analysis reveals that poetry can encourage us to listen diligently and critically to the insincerity ubiquitous in public discourse.

FLORIAN GARGAILLO is associate professor of English at Austin Peay State University.

PRAISE FOR *ECHO AND CRITIQUE*:

“Florian Gargaillo writes an excellent and fascinating study by demonstrating how poets employed ‘echo and critique,’ especially during and following World War II, in order to wrestle with and question the underlying assumptions of political and public speech. . . . His book is superb across the board, with a thorough and subtle examination of a wide-ranging group of poets.”—Lisa Goldfarb, author of *Unexpected Affinities: Modern American Poetry and Symbolist Poetics*



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