9-2-2008

Julie Prandi Shares Her Work on the Poet Anna Karsch

Charlie Schlenker
WGLT, Illinois State University

Self Taught Poets qa

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So-called peasant poets of the 17-hundreds have something to offer modern readers. That's according to a new book written by a Bloomington Normal Scholar. WGLT's Charlie Schlenker has more….

09-02selftaughtpoetsqa 5:20 soq

Charlie Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan University Professor Julie Prandi had done work on a neglected poet, Anna Louisa Karsch, neglected because of her lowly social origin—Karsch was self-taught. Prandi wanted to turn that study into a larger project, which became the *Poetry of the Self-Taught: An Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon*. Prandi says she found other poets like Karsh had some commonalities that even cross linguistic lines from Germany to England.

Julie Prandi: Partly in their, what I would call, rhetorical strategies in their poetry content-wise, they talk about similar things—everyday life and everyday experience—and they include a lot of autobiographical material, which some people consider that a minus…[laughs]…as far as their work goes.

Charlie Schlenker: And in the 1700s, the more literary poets, what did they talk about?

Julie Prandi: They tended to have a kind of different audience in mind, which was fellow educated usually male people who were knowledgeable in the Classics. The Augustan poets read Virgil and Horace and imitated also the forms of those poets. They don't talk so much about their lives. There tends to be a lot of imitation of earlier poets both in theme and metaphor whereas my poets tend to have a lot more in the way of original and experienced in a direct way, not that—mainstream poets, of course, experienced their poetry also but they tend to see it, they cast it in forms that are familiar to people and that make for echoes of earlier poets that they're all familiar with, including the Classical echoes, which were very important to accredit yourself as a poet in the eighteenth century.

Charlie Schlenker: The self-taught have similarities in content—

Julie Prandi: Yes.

Charlie Schlenker: But you—what about structure?

Julie Prandi: As a group they exhibit a great deal of variety there, which is perhaps not what one would expect. Certainly—Burns for example used the **hobby?? (1:54)**, which was a Scottish

verse form, Scottish folk form. A lot of my poets are interested—or some of them are—interested in local customs, local color, and that can seem to limit them regionally in their fame. Burns managed to come above that, although it's been said about him that he's been limited too by his use of Scots dialect and his focus on Ayrshire and Lower Scots as his home.

Charlie Schlenker: What was the audience for these self-taught poets?

Julie Prandi: There's a strong tendency for this to be poetry that is orally presented at a social group, at a social gathering, on the most elementary level, written for a wedding or a funeral—that was a typical way—and these poems were, of course, composed beforehand but then read in front of a live audience. Karsch actually performed at parties. Burns, of course, performed in pubs with other poets and they exchanged their songs and sang them together. So an oral presentation and a live audience was important, I think, to these poets becoming known.

Charlie Schlenker: And when did we lose that, that emphasis on performance?

Julie Prandi: People talk about a major turn between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century where Romanticism started to get going and this turn toward Romanticism has to do with the concept of poetry which tended to be less social than you had in the eighteenth century, so like the eighteenth century had satire. Satire was a very big genre in poetry and all my—practically all of them engage in that by the way, so that was not popular when we got to the poetry of the nineteenth century. The Romantic mold wanted something serious. They also thought of poetry as being something for the solitary person sitting at home and having his or her own thoughts whereas the concept of my poets was that poetry is social and it can be fun and they have a lot of humor in their poetry, which I think is an idea that we've lost or we consider humorous poetry trivial to a large extent.

Charlie Schlenker: It sounds like they'd fit in better today than they did a century ago.

Julie Prandi: Yeah, and, in fact, I argue that. I try to think of our way of doing poetry slams and saying, "Well, you know, my poets would be totally at home with that."

Charlie Schlenker: What do they hold for us today? Do they bear a second or third look?

Julie Prandi: Three of the four women poets that I do treat sort of what we might call today feminist themes and that, of course, is interesting. I also think that the sensual concreteness, which is a real strong suit of the poets that I've studied, is attractive today and I think the **sub-top 4:33??** poets lean a lot more on taste, smell, and touch—those senses. You can find a lot of poetry that are very sensuous as far as it's describing for the eye and for the ear but these other three senses that get much closer to you bodily, that really have a reaction that's physical when you find that imagery it's well-presented and people get specific about certain tactile, as I say, smell and taste—that's actually very powerful. Those effects come through to today's reader the way they did at the time that they were written and I think that's exciting.

Charlie Schlenker: To hear readings from the self-taught poets by Illinois Wesleyan University Professor Julie Prandi go to WGLT.org/newsroom. Prandi's new book is out from Peter Lang Publishing. I'm Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News.