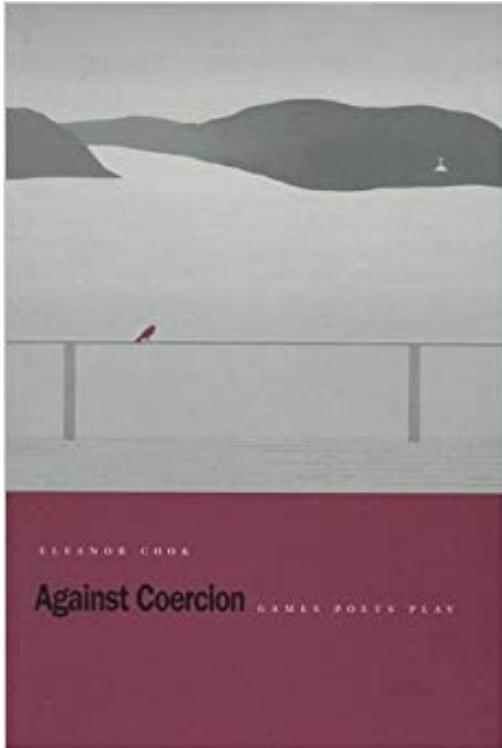


## Against Coercion: Games Poets Play *by* Eleanor Cook



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**Author:** Eleanor Cook

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"The inertia of language," declares Geoffrey Hill, is also "the coercive force of language." Good poets write against coercion, and *Against Coercion* is essentially about the power of words. Looking at our most highly organized form of words, poems, and how they work, it observes how that work speaks—always indirectly—to historical, ethical, and aesthetic questions, including matters of culture, identity, and feminism. It also demonstrates how to read poetry—how to go beyond an elementary (and usually boring) approach, thereby recovering the sheer pleasure of good poems and resisting the coercion of language, that power of words to do ill. A study in advanced poetics, *Against Coercion* pays close attention to the intricate workings of poems, building larger claims on specific evidence and enjoying the praxis of master writers. The focus is on modern poets, from the early moderns (Stevens, Eliot) through to mid-century (Bishop) and recent (Merrill, Hill). Some chapters reach back to Milton, Wordsworth, and Aristophanes, however, while two even widen to encompass prose fiction. The opening section centers on matters of empire, war, and nation. It includes chapters on Eliot, Keynes, and empire, and on Geoffrey Hill and Elizabeth Bishop (with reflections on language and war). The second section moves to questions of culture and the uses of memory, notably in allusion to earlier writers. It examines what our collective memory chooses to retain and to forget. The range of reference here extends from the King James Bible through Milton and Wordsworth to A. R. Ammons. In the third section, poetry is seen at play, offering those happy occasions when work and play become one. Chapters treat the concept of play in Milton (including some feminist questions), the poetics of punning in Stevens and Bishop, riddles both large and small, in Stevens, a proposed typology of riddles, and a newly recovered Graeco-Latin pun in *Alice in Wonderland*. The final section moves to practical criticism and offers a new theory of ghost rhymes, a new suggestion of a formula in dream literature, a model for reading a poem, using John Hollander's "Owl" as an illustration, and, taking Stevens as an example, a pedagogical argument that emphasizes the importance of logic and thought in poetry.



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