

DOI 10.1515/zaa-2014-0022

Jennifer Ashton, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2013. Pb. xxx, 238pp. \$ 27,99.
ISBN 978-0-0521-14795-8.

Jennifer Ashton's *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945* (2013) is a fine collection of essays on poets and poetry movements since the beginnings of American literary postmodernism. As with every volume of the *Cambridge Companion* series, the editor has to grapple with a dual challenge: the book has to maintain the didactic introductory tone that has become the trademark feature of the series while also accommodating the needs and interests of a more informed scholarly readership. In the case of the present volume, this challenge becomes especially urgent since the "post45" designation is itself "comparatively new" and "its canons are still in the making" (1). Anyone interested in historicizing the contemporary must embrace its necessary openness as a historical period description. This is an intriguing theoretical problem, but probably not something that a first year English student will look for.

Ashton is aware of her responsibility as editor, which is reflected both in the selection of the individual chapters and the way they are framed by Ashton's own contributions at the beginning and the end of the book. In her very careful introduction, "Periodizing Poetic Practice since 1945," she explains that the overall structure of the book follows a linear historical timeline – beginning as early as 1931, the year in which the Objectivists came into being as a group after Louis Zukofsky had edited the February issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Despite the acknowledged sense of linearity, however, Ashton's principle of compilation derives from her understanding of poetic "practice," a term that makes sense not as a direct reflection of a pervasive political climate or the predominance of *Zeitgeist* but only in the context of questions relating to the nature of poetry and the job of the poet. This is a feature that distinguishes Ashton's *Cambridge Companion* from parallel editorial projects, such as the *Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2013) or the forthcoming *Cambridge History of American Poetry*. The volume thus concentrates on questions like "Who or what determines the meaning of a poem?," "In what ways do poems seek to represent persons?," or "To what extent do poems belong to the world of experience that we inhabit, and to what extent should they be understood as categorically distinct from that world" (2).

The notion of "poetic practice" provides the conceptual grid for the volume, which consists of 14 chapters dedicated to a particular school or type of poetry as

they relate to the corresponding social, political, and aesthetic formations that shaped the work of the poets under discussion. It is true, as Ashton points out, that the concepts and categories that organize the individual parts are “not all taxonomically equivalent to one another” (1), but this is also what makes this volume so attractive. It evades homogenizing period distinctions – from early to late postmodernism, say – and instead underlines the diversity of different and sometimes conflicting forms of poetic practice that have emerged throughout the past six decades. Just think of the dichotomies that arise when comparing the theory-minded texts of the Language poets with the self-expressive poetry in the wake of the Black Arts movement, or the “workshopped” (10) poems of creative writing classes with poetry that represents what Christina Pugh discusses in chapter 12 as the “contemporary mainstream lyric.”

Owing to this sense of diversity, readers will find a productively hybrid mix of essays. It includes more familiar chapters, such as the ones on confessional poetry (Chapter 3), the San Francisco Renaissance (Chapter 5), poetry of the Beat Generation (Chapter 6), feminist poetry (Chapter 8), ecocritical poetry (Chapter 9), and the Language School (Chapter 10). But readers will also be delighted to discover less likely candidates – for example Oren Itzenberg’s discussion of the so-called “academic poet” (Chapter 13) – or surprising variations of seemingly familiar poetry movements, such as Charles Altieri’s account of the interdependencies between New York School poetry and abstract expressionism and surrealism in postwar painting (Chapter 4). Though the individual chapters are all thoroughly contextualized in the relevant literary and historical discourses, each contribution ending with recommendations for further reading, Ashton decided to employ an additional didactic tool – a detailed “Chronology of Publications and Events” – to help readers find their ways in the jungle of postwar poetry. This section is placed at the beginning of the volume and contains a carefully selected bibliography of major books and poems in addition to a list of Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award recipients in the poetry categories between 1945 and 2010.

Attentive readers of this volume will realize how much planning and conceptual framing Ashton’s editorial work must have required. And yet the real strength of this book comes from the individual contributors who all manage to insist in their case studies on the particularities of poetic practices while not losing sight of the broader intellectual and intertextual continuities that exist between the poetry schools and traditions they all individually discuss. Mark Scroggins’ chapter on the connection between the Objectivists around Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen and Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’-poetics is an exemplary case. After outlining the short-lived Objectivist revolution in the early 1930s and its demise that came about with the Great Depression, Scroggins’ shows not only *that* but also *how* the Black Mountain poets revitalized central ideas of the objectivist aesthetic during

the early 1950s in the pursuit of a poetic program that would be freed from “the lyrical interference of the ego,” as Olson famously claimed in his 1950 essay. What conjoined the “Projectivists and the Objectivists” was “an ongoing investment in foregrounding the materiality of their language” (25), a point that already anticipated the “most vexed issue among practitioners in the first decade of Language writing,” “referentiality and narrative” (147). Similar trajectories connect the essays of Deborah Nelson on the problem of privacy in confessional poetry and the essay of Michael Davidson on the formation of the San Francisco Renaissance poets. Both authors show that despite the divergent reception of Beat writing and Confessional Poetry, representative writers of both camps were simultaneously interested in exploring the limits of self-hood and self-control in the context of Cold War coercion. By examining the innermost parts of what they believed was the human self Beat writers and Confessional writers engaged imminently political discussions of what it means to have privacy. “Privacy,” Nelson reminds us, “would be defined and redefined, exalted and protested, violated and protected in ever-changing ways as the twentieth century came to an end” (43). Needless to say, the political dimension of postwar poetry took on different forms and it emerged in different, institutionally filtered contexts. The distinction between institutional and non-institutional and academic and non-academic writing is thus another integral point of discussion this *Cambridge Companion* explores. Hank Lazer’s “American Poetry and its Institutions,” Oren Itzenberg’s “Poems in and out of School,” and Michael Clune’s “Rap, Hip Hop, Spoken Word”, a piece taken from his *American Literature and the Free Market* (2010), reflect the institutionality of poetry in numerous illuminating ways.

The arguably most interesting part of the book begins, however, at its end, namely with Jennifer Ashton’s own contribution, “Poetry of the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade.” Based on discussions of poems by Tao Lin and Michael Fried, whom readers more likely remember as art critic and the author of “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Ashton makes two provocative claims. The first claim is that Lin and Fried feature different versions of the claim that exploring the grounds of subjective self-expression means to subscribe to the ideology of the capitalist free market production circle. While the expression and recognition of the poet’s subjectivity may tell us a lot about a person’s identity, it does not tell us anything about the social grounds that define our lives. We do not learn about “scarcity,” when we concern ourselves with what people feel. Hence Ashton’s claim that the new project of 21st century poetry “will have to relinquish the ground of personhood and enter into a serious consideration of the ground of ‘scarcity’” (221). Related to the scarcity argument is Ashton’s second claim that all postwar schools of poetry, that is, the ones featured in the volume, are predicated on a neo-liberal logic of redistribution that needs people to believe in the value of

subjectivity to obscure its more market-radical consequences for the social world, namely that the rich get richer and richer, while the poor get poorer and poorer.

Whether or not this is the lesson 21st century poetry has in store for us must remain open for debate. Readers will surely profit from the controversial arguments that will follow Ashton's piece. But even more importantly, they will profit from a collection of essays that with only few exceptions will help them understand the major fields and terms of post45 American poetry.