

fictionalized authors, Demented Panda and Koki, have found themselves in. The two collaborating poets are disgusted with the egotism of the traditional lyric and yet would like to find a mode which would, within a larger anti-lyric skepticism, allow them to preserve emotional agency (253-54).

Nikki Skillman wrote an important and insightful book. Filled with effective readings, lucidly argued, and exuberantly written, it's now the most important single book-length analysis of this key aspect of contemporary lyric. Importantly, her approach helps bridge a deep divide between confessional poetry and the more language-centered poetic modes.

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**Kacper Bartczak, ed. *Poeci Szkoły Nowojorskiej* [The Poets of the New York School]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2018. 364 pages.**

In his editorial introduction to a recent volume in the series *Mistrzowie Literatury Amerykańskiej* (*Masters of American Literature*), Kacper Bartczak ponders what the New York School of poetry was and what it is now, thus placing his critical discussion in a historical context and unveiling recurrent classification problems. Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and Kenneth Koch—whose work is explored in this book—never identified as members of the New York School, never expressed a desire for artistic affiliation, and never sketched any group manifesto. As Ashbery elucidated, “this label was foisted upon us by a man named John Bernard Myers, who ran the Tibor de Nagy Gallery.... I don't think we were ever a school.... We were a bunch of poets who happened to know each other; we would get together and read our poems to each other and sometimes we would write collaborations” (*The Paris Review Interviews* 182).

The book edited by Kacper Bartczak constitutes an important and nuanced response to those classification dilemmas. Unlike David Lehman, who coined the term “the last avant-garde” to argue that the New York School poets (except Guest whom he excluded from his study) were “the last authentic avant-garde movement that we had in American poetry” (1), the authors of the essays collected in this volume avoid grandiose statements about the role of this casually formed “school” in the history of North American avant-gardes. Instead of atomizing distinctive features of New York School poetics, they highlight the overlapping aesthetic impulses, tendencies, and interests that bring this “bunch of poets who happened to know each other” together. In the present volume, the New York School emerges as an ephemeral “event,” propelled by artistic encounters and exchanges between Schuyler, O'Hara, Ashbery, Koch, and Guest. Importantly, Bartczak argues that what consolidates the group is a shared attempt at “integrating the poem with a real, material-psychological and context-based event.” This integrative effort also “generates the event itself, in a way both surprising and unpredictable for its participants” (9). Paradoxically, however, such organic welding

can be engendered, as Bartczak clarifies, “only through the artificiality of form.”<sup>1</sup> In that regard, the New York School could be considered a “materialization of myriad styles, techniques, and methods, which emerged from a particular spatiotemporal location, generating experimental energy that is still resonating today, both in the US and Poland” (9).

The emphasis on the dynamics of creative process, coupled with a lack of programmatic ideas, is another important point of convergence, as the critic Brian Reed and the contributors to this volume demonstrate (Bartczak 14). Reading the New York School poets *through* one another gives us a better insight into the intricate and shifting life-poetry interrelations, which cannot be easily pinned down and encapsulated in a clear-cut definition. As Geoff Ward suggests in his review of Barbara Guest’s *If So, Tell Me*, we should look at the “New York School” as a “provisional exercise in cognitive mapping rather than a fixed, historical or regional reality.” The present book gathers essays from scholars, critics, and poets, who embark on such exercise in literary cartography. By bringing O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch, Schuyler, and Guest into a shared conversation, they unfold a map that enables the reader to navigate his/her experience of the New York School as an event rather than ossified and insular category.

This powerful effect has been achieved also thanks to the skillful arrangement of the chapters. The dynamism of the New York School is transposed into the structure of the book, loosely divided into four thematic fields: “Plasticity, Ekphrasis, Intermediality,” “The Constructions of Subjectivity,” “Technique and Formal Consistency,” and “Influence.” The chapters grouped in each section enter into a polyphonous and lively dialogue, which is quite rare in multi-authored publications.

In the opening section, the authors situate their discussion of plasticity in the context of the New York School poets’ close collaborations with visual artists and their strong interests in painting, which ranged widely across Italian Mannerism, surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, action painting, and Fairfield Porter’s soft-focused realism. Marek Wilczyński looks at the genealogies of such intense interdisciplinary interactions, pointing out that O’Hara et al. were not the first New York cohort that established strong ties with painters. In the first half of the nineteenth century influential relationships were also formed between the Knickerbockers, among others groups, and Romantic painters who were part of the Hudson River School. The scholar makes connections between these two cohorts, identifying their shared impulse to shift towards the new—uniquely American—modes of expression. Wilczyński also argues that aesthetic philosophy of O’Hara, Ashbery and Schuyler was partly influenced by Emerson’s theorizing on the relation between nature and “the self.” In the subsequent chapter, Paulina Ambroży discusses the role of visual arts in Ashbery’s work, focusing on a famous ekphrastic poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (1975), inspired by Parmigianino’s painting. Through a close reading of the poem, the scholar demonstrates how the genre of self-portrait helps Ashbery problematize elaborate mechanisms of perception, the impossibility of self-representation, and the elusiveness of “the self.” Following Jean Luc Nancy, Ambroży argues that Ashbery’s self-portrait shows us that we can never approximate any “essence” of subjectivity, only the “relational

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1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of excerpts from *Poeci Szkoły Nowojorskiej* are my own.

multiplicity of the voices of the Other—the imaginary structure of possibilities, styles, languages, and language events that produce a sort of ‘noise’ that leads to what can be termed a ‘non-recognition’” (48).

Mikołaj Wiśniewski, on the other hand, illustrates how Fairfield Porter’s soft-focused realism is reflected in James Schuyler’s poetic technique, including his sensuous rendering of the quotidian. Tracing Schuyler’s transition from diaristic prose to prose poetry, Wiśniewski asserts that what might seem a stylistic awkwardness or nonchalance on the part of the poet, is, in fact, a deliberately employed strategy. What emerges underneath a seemingly chaotic surface is a well-thought-out pattern, whose painterly consistency is achieved through the recurrence of intricately and subtly connected motives (95-96). Dense sensuousness is also discussed in the last chapter in the section, only this in time with regard to Barbara Guest’s experimental verse. Alicja Piechucka’s reading of Guest’s early poem titled “Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher” also includes a commentary on its Polish translation by Tadeusz Rybowski. The translator’s counterintuitive use of the gender-related verb forms prompts the scholar to ponder the functions of the gendered “I” in Guest’s work in the context of both “poetics of indeterminacy” and surrealism, which—as the poet argued in her interview with Rachel Blau DuPlessis—“meant freedom, especially for a woman” (169-170).

Piechucka also briefly discusses the exclusion of Guest’s work from both university textbooks and major anthologies of North American poetry. It is noteworthy that Guest has been also omitted from a number of publications devoted exclusively to the New York School, including the 1970 *Anthology of New York Poets*, edited by Ron Padgett and David Shapiro; and David Lehman’s more recent *The Last Avant-Garde. The Making of the New York School of Poets*. In Poland, as Piechucka documents, Guest’s oeuvre still remains largely unrecognized. *Poeci Szkoły Nowjorskiej*, which includes one essay on this innovative poet, constitutes an important contribution to the current state of research. It is regrettable, however, that more critical work on Guest’s experimental technique, minimalism, or the sonic quality of her verse, has not been included, especially since the volume comprises six articles on Ashbery, whose work has been much better recognized in Poland. Bringing Guest into a shared conversation with fellow New York School poets might have been a yet another asset of this book.

The second section, which masterfully elaborates O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s complex negotiations of subjectivity, opens with Marjorie Perloff’s essay on O’Hara’s personism, translated by Dominika Bernacka. Perloff demonstrates how the poet—through his performative straightforwardness—escapes Eliot’s impersonal imperative, construing in his verse new forms of intimacy and affectivity, which cannot be reduced to confession. The essay sets the scene for subsequent discussions of “expression,” the “I” of the poem, and the poetic self-creation. Jacek Gutorow claims that Ashbery is, “in a fact, a Romantic poet” (141). Nevertheless, such reading requires, as the scholar argues, a much more nuanced definition of Romantic consciousness, which would move beyond its popular understanding as a “more developed form of sentimentalism, characterized by a direct expression of feelings” (142). Gutorow not only reminds us about the importance of irony, parody, denial, and rhetorical distance in Romantic philosophy, but also draws our attention to the Romantic conviction about the

“dialectical, ergo processual and equivocal, dimension of both consciousness and reality,” which is also expressed in Ashbery’s works (143).

Kacper Bartczak’s essay constitutes another intervention into habitual modes of thinking subjectivity and poetic expression. Bartczak argues that Ashbery’s poetics overcomes a text/life binary, offering us a new perspective on the elusive interrelations between the text and affective individual experience of its author. Drawing on Alexander Nehamas’s idea of aesthetic self-creation, the scholar rethinks the role of the autobiographical in Ashbery’s work away from both the confessional aesthetics of self-expression and the idea of “I” as purely textual. The emerging subject-positions in Ashbery’s work are not, as Bartczak illustrates, prior to the poem, but emerge simultaneously with the text. This section closes with the chapter on O’Hara authored by Tadeusz Pióro and translated by Jakub Statnik. Unlike many other critical works that emphasize vitality of the subject in O’Hara’s poetry, Pióro’s essay accentuates the problem of existential boredom and angst. Frenetic movement and intensity manifested in O’Hara’s poetry might be read as defense mechanisms against the recurring moments of spleen.

The third section further elaborates poetic technique and form, already problematized in the previous chapters, but from a different vantage point. Both Paweł Marcinkiewicz and Anna Warso ponder the intricacies of Ashbery’s evolving poetics, giving the reader an insight into fascinating aesthetic shifts and transpositions. Marcinkiewicz argues that in his 2015 collection *Breezeway*, Ashbery returns to those energy sources that gave impetus to the New York School early poetry—the language play and immersion in the quotidian. Interestingly, the scholar brings the title poem into Polish as “Bryzo, wiej,” thus emphasizing the phonetic, visual and associative dimension of the original. This experimental translation is also meant to illustrate that Ashbery’s recent collection not only constitutes an *open passage* connecting the past and the present, but also embodies writing as *floating away* from the literary canon (226). An instance of concrete poetry, *Breezeway* can be read as a formal variation on Pound’s ideogram-inspired verse, a variation which nevertheless lacks underlying consistency and “slips into a pure play with indeterminacy”—a bricolage of quotes and intertextual references that do not hold together or illuminate one another (232). Anna Warso, in contrast, brings into focus Ashbery’s second poetry collection, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), which provoked heated debate among critics. While Harold Bloom was outraged by its disjunctiveness, the “Language” poets considered it of great significance, both aesthetically and politically (243). Like the latter, Warso views *The Tennis Court Oath* as a pioneering work, in which Ashbery developed radically experimental techniques that he would employ in his later work. The poems collected in this volume, similarly to those from *Breezeway*, follow the logic of montage, with its elements working as linguistic “objets trouvés,” as Marcinkiewicz put it (221). However, while parts of the hypertextual bricolage in *Breezeway* cannot be, as Marcinkiewicz convincingly argues, pieced together, Warso demonstrates that in *The Tennis Court Oath* Ashbery creates a “hospitable space” that welcomes a participatory reading, thus opening up the possibility of collective sense-making.

In the first section a lot has been said about the New York School poets’ intense interactions with painters, and their strong interest in visual arts. In the closing chapter

of the third section, Magdalena Szuster reminds us about their fascination with drama, thus contributing to a more comprehensive mapping of the group's positioning across different genres. Looking at Kenneth Koch's 1988 *One Thousand Avant-Garde Plays*, Szuster claims that his work might be considered an alternative to both mainstream and "postmodernist avant-garde" theatre (257). The scholar defines Koch's style as eclectic since it draws on a number of diverse traditions—occidental, oriental, surrealist, futurist, or even gospel (267). His reliance on a wide array of techniques, coupled with a consistent refusal to engage in any forms of political agitation, makes his work resistant to categorization. Szuster also asserts that although Koch's technique is montage-like, it exhibits internal consistency. As in the case of Schuyler's poetry, the seemingly unrelated parts form an underlying intricate pattern (266).

The closing section discusses the impact of the New York School of poetry on both US and Polish poets. A comprehensive and much needed perspective provided in this part significantly contributes to comparative literary studies. In his essay on LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Jerzy Kamionowski problematizes an intimate relationship between aesthetics and politics, demonstrating how O'Hara's personism, among other New York School techniques, shaped Baraka's poetics. The scholar's understanding of personism differs, however, from that offered by Marjorie Perloff. While Perloff conceives of O'Hara's apparently "straightforward" poetic performance as a non-confessional construct, Kamionowski reads it as a "non-masked personal presence," which might be considered a response to the "depersonalization" of poetry favored by the New Critics (283). The author argues that the New York School aesthetics became partly integrated into Baraka's conceptualization of "Black Aesthetics." At the same time, however, Baraka refused to separate his art from the pressing problems of racial discrimination, or to limit his radicalism to formal experimentation. This reminds us about the importance of the poet's broadly understood location and the impact it has on their approach towards newness and social-commitment in literature.

The two subsequent chapters elaborate the influence that O'Hara and Ashbery exerted on Polish contemporary poetry. Joanna Orska scrutinizes the "translation-transit game" between Ashbery and one of the major contemporary Polish poets—Andrzej Sosnowski (309). The scholar claims that a considerable interest in narrative poetic forms, or the so called *poet's prose*, observed in Poland in the 1990s was triggered by the translations of both New York School and modernist poetry (307). In her meticulous analysis, Orska demonstrates how Sosnowski's translations of Ashbery's *poet's prose*, affected—at many levels—his own writing, and renewed formally Polish prose. Krzysztof Siwczyk, on the other hand, examines how the critical reception of O'Hara's poems, translated by Piotr Sommer and collected in the volume *Twoja pojedynczość* (1986), shaped the understanding of his poetics. Siwczyk points out that literary critics at the time tended to reduce O'Hara's technique to a few slogans that comprised the idea of the poet's "authenticity" and "I see and describe" approach (331). Profiled in such a way, O'Hara was then deemed a major influencer, whose impact was identified in the works of the *brulion* generation writers like Marcin Świetlicki and Jacek Podsiadło, who became soon referred to as *o'harists*. Siwczyk claims that it was not until 2015, when more works by O'Hara were brought into Polish, that such oversimplified representations were started to be revised. The

recent translations enabled, as Siwczyk proves, new readings of O'Hara's poetics away from the prematurely ascribed labels. The critic brings together O'Hara and two contemporary Polish poets—Maciej Melecki and Marcin Sendecki—to rethink the meanings of “influence” and examine what their poetic languages share.

The volume closes with Przemysław Owczarek's critical-creative text, which might be regarded as an exercise in embodied reading-writing. The author is looking at O'Hara's poems while walking through the streets of Łódź—“an impoverished sister” of New York (337). The energy and rhythms of both cities—as well as those of O'Hara's verse—become transposed into Owczarek's text. The walk prompts the critic to ponder different aspects of “city habitats” as well as “textual habitats” of the New York School poet's work (343-344). “Close yet not to close reading” of the city-rooted poems intermingles with discussions of urban theory and references to O'Hara criticism. Multiple voices can be heard as the author is walking down Piotrkowska Street, arguing that O'Hara was, in fact, not a *flâneur*—a connoisseur of aesthetic pleasures, strolling around the city with no purpose or time limitations—but rather a “przemyskacz”—an autochthon who moves frenetically and “intuitively knows where he is going and why” (361).

In his essay, Jacek Gutorow invites us to “engage in an attentive and committed reading, which is directed at discovering in a text the living and ever-changing forms of experience and expression” (169). I would argue that all essays gathered in this volume constitute such an invitation and enable the reader to become a curator of his/her experience of the “ephemeral event” known as the New York School of poetry. What is more, each chapter addresses the questions that are still very much alive in the critical discussions around most recent US poetry and poetics. This includes life-text interrelations, different meanings of the political in art, or the problem of expression, experiment and subjectivity. Thus, the present book is a highly recommended read not only for those interested specifically in the New York School, but for anyone committed to a non-reductive reading of literature.

### Works Cited

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