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American Poetry – Andrew Epstein, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Poetry Since 1945*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2023

Andrew Epstein is a professor of American Literature at Florida State University in Tallahassee. He writes about modern and contemporary American poetry and poetics, modernism and postmodernism, theories and practices of avant-garde, literature and culture of the Cold War era, etc. His previous books include *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2006) and *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (2016). In his book *The Cambridge Introduction to American Poetry Since 1945*, he examines American poetry, which is notably the most influential poetry culture on a transnational scale, particularly during the Cold War Era. Epstein maps the concepts, formations, and individual work of various poets, dividing his book in three parts, “American Poetry from 1945 to 1970”, “American Poetry from 1970 to 2000” and “Into the New Millennium: American Poetry from 2000 to the Present”.

The most distinguished characteristic of American Poetry from 1945 to 1970 is that it was able to generate two mutually opposing streams: the academic, more conservative stream (often referred to as the mainstream) and the antiacademic, known as The New American Poetry, highlighted in Donald Allen’s groundbreaking anthology *The New American Poetry 1945–1960*, published in 1960. In his book, Epstein explores these two opposing streams and their changes over time.

In the first part, Epstein discusses influential poets-critics, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, known as New Critics, who insisted on “well-crafted, allusive, and learned poetry” (p. 19), and insisted on their close reading as a “central pedagogical tool in literary studies”. He then examines the emergence of New American Poetry in separate chapters focusing on the Black Mountain poets, the Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, and the New York School. These schools based their poetry practice the in European and American avant-garde of the first part of 20th century and developed a distinct poetics in which poets discursively articulated their ideas about poetry and explored new ways of writing. Epstein also wrote about confessional poetry, deep image poetry and African American Poetry.

The second part of the book examines how New American Poetry changed mainstream poetics in the 1970s and 1980s. The period from 1970 to 2000 saw the appearance of experimental Language poetry, feminist mainstream and feminist experimental poetry. It was a time of diversification in American poetry largely due to the identity politics. In writing about African American, Latinx, Asian American, Native American and LGBTQ Poetry, Epstein traces the dramatic changes in this field in two ways.

American poetry, which until 1970 had been predominantly white, male and middle class, began to diversify along the lines of identity politics that I previously mentioned. At the same time, the significance of Language poetry is emphasized, as Language poets made experimentation an essential aspect of poetry. In the 1970s, Language poets positioned themselves against mainstream “anti-intellectual, neo-Romantic model of lyrical self-expression” (p. 146), establishing an anti-lyric paradigm. They adopted anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist perspectives, decentering subjectivity and dismantling “the notion of coherent, essential selfhood” (p. 146). They were theoretically oriented, focusing their attention on language and the ways of meaning making. Epstein wrote:

Language poetry, an avant-garde movement that started out on the margins of American poetry, gradually infiltrated and fundamentally changed ‘official verse culture,’ the name given to the mainstream poetry world by Charles Bernstein, one of its founders. While a number of leading Language poets, like Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Susan Howe, and Ron Silliman, have been increasingly accepted and canonized, Language poetry has also more indirectly influenced the shape of a great deal of poetry being written today that has little in common with original movement. (p. 210).

In presenting the work of African American, Latinx, Asian American, Native American Poetries, Epstein, shows that poets in these formations started working in relation to the “political struggles for civil rights that reached a fever pitch during the 1960s. The dramatic social upheavals of this period ushered in an era of frenetic creativity, literary community-building by writers of color, and the successful push to establish ethnic studies programs in US universities”, continuing to explain that American poetry was seen then “as a multicultural genre and perspectives that had long been marginalized or ignored burst into full view. In the 1960s and 1970s, this new poetry often aligned itself with social change and political activism; it focused on speaking collectively for communities of color, voicing political outrage and calling for racial pride and solidarity” (p. 174). At the same time, these poetries were not monolithic in style. Many poets of color experimented with forms, connecting the innovative poetry with questions of race.

Epstein wrote that “in post-2000 American poetry had been this rapid diversification, in terms of gender, sexuality, sexual identity, ability, and race and ethnicity” (p. 208). He pointed to the three most significant changes in this period, which are:

- 1) the collapse of the old binary opposition between mainstream and experimental and the emergence of a new ‘hybrid’ mode; 2) a new openness to remix, sampling, and the use of found language and documentary materials in poetry, which can be seen, in part, as a response to the rise of the digital age and new questions about originality and appropriation it has ushered in, and 3) a resurgence of politically engaged, formally adventurous poetry, especially by poets of color, in the era of Obama and Trump (p. 210).

Despite the extensive translation and recognition of American poetry in socialist Yugoslavia and after its decomposition (numerous anthologies of American published from 1952 to 2023, approximately 25), many aspects remain unexplored.

Epstein’s book traces the various changes and divisions within this rich field, highlighting the lesser-known developments, especially those related to multiculturalism and poetry associated with identity politics. Another often-overlooked aspect is the central role of experimental poetry, including Language poets and with feminist experimental poetry. Interestingly, in 1993 and 1994, three influential anthologies were published that established alternative canons of American poetry, spanning from the era of New American Poetry to Language Poetry. They were edited by Eliot Weinberger (*American Poetry since 1950: Innovators and outsiders*), Paul Hoover (*Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*), and Douglas Messerli (*From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960–1990*). Epstein’s book serves as an excellent introduction to the richness and diversity of American poetry.