

Encyclopedia of The New York School of Poets
Terence Diggory
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Those of us engaged in studying Beat writers are inevitably aware of how problematic labels and boundaries can be. None of us would likely agree completely on what the term “Beat” entails, which writers are fully Beat, or what the word “Generation” in “Beat Generation” quite implies (a literary movement of some sort? a cultural phenomenon? a social one?). The label Beat, like “IT” in *On the Road*, is to some extent, as Dean Moriarity puts it, fraught with “impon-de-rables—ahem!” From an academic perspective this is something of a problem. Areas of study should, it seems, include a precise, coherent account of what constitutes the area, but this fluidity has its positives, as well. Destabilizing structures, challenging reified procedures, and disrupting established boundaries between art and non-art and between the culturally elite art traditions and folk and pop practices were all central to the Beat agenda. Working the Beat territory often involves an attempt to mediate these dissonances and what are often productively porous boundaries.

Terence Diggory’s *Encyclopedia of the New York School of Poets* relates to this fluidity of cultural production and this instability of critical categories in several ways that should matter to those studying the Beats. First, the New York School of Poets emerged in parallel to the Beats, and, as Diggory notes in his entry on “Beats,” the two loose communities of writers, painters, and musicians “frequently intermingled.” Moreover, each movement initially set itself in opposition to the gentility and restrictiveness that the American academy and mainstream journals sought to define—and enforce—in the late 1940s and 1950s. While it is clear that a key first generation New York School figure like John Ashbery would never be mistaken for a Beat poet, Frank O’Hara, an equally central first generation figure, illustrates how closely the two groups could align in their approach. *The Encyclopedia of the New York School of Poets* distills a wealth of information about writers, key events, modes of production, schisms and alliances, and outgrowths and intersections that are highly relevant to understanding the Beats, and it does so with truly impressive clarity and sophistication. Moreover, the *Encyclopedia* makes it clear how and why writers such as Joanne Kyger, Philip Whalen, Tom Clark, Anne Waldman, John Weiners, and Patti Smith could be important figures for both our understanding of the Beats and the New York School, while other developments within the New York School, such as the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E movement could stand in stark and open opposition to the ethos and practices that we associate with the Beat Generation.

But there’s another aspect of *The Encyclopedia of the New York School of Poets* that should matter to those studying the Beats. In part Diggory’s achievement in the book is to compile the wealth of information that we associate with encyclopedias. Encyclopedias are supposed to function as a handy, authoritative reference for the newcomer trying to get started with a topic and for the seasoned hand needing to fill a gap, check a detail, or ensure that Point A really could have connected to Point B. *The Encyclopedia of the New York School of Poets* fulfills all these expectations. But the volume also functions as a significant critical intervention and yet does so without compromising its ability to function as a reference work for a wide range of users and occasions.

In part this is because Diggory has framed the volume so that the difficulties raised by gathering the various writers, texts, and developments together under the label “New York School of Poets” are flagged clearly in the volume’s lucid, deeply informed, and judicious Introduction. It’s also because the entries themselves allow the overarching term of “New York School” to function not as some Platonic paradigm reflecting some reified aesthetic ideology but instead as an historical descriptor, so that the coherence and value of the category “New York School” emerges from the dialogues and transactions of those involved or related to the New York School, and the nature of the category can change across the period covered. As a result, what links the work and projects of those considered third generation New York School figures with those considered first generation figures is not some hidden structural core consistent across the range and time of some idealized New York School canon but instead the negotiations involved in actual New York School practice and how those negotiations developed and shifted over time. By choosing not to advocate for a particular definition of the essence of “New York School” and instead emphasizing how those who have identified themselves as part of the New York School or who have been linked with it have actually functioned, Diggory has emphasized the pragmatic and functional over the abstract and structural. More significantly, the result is an encyclopedia that judiciously balances coherence and fluidity and one in which the boundaries surrounding the New York School become productive zones of interaction rather than walls around a privileged enclave. As those engaged in Beat Studies continue to wrestle with what defines the domain of Beat, Diggory’s approach is a productive model to consider.

Diggory’s fulfillment and subversion of the paradigm for the encyclopedia as an enterprise is evident in another way that should be noted. Often in volumes such as this one, each entry is written by someone expert in the particular topic or text or writer, and the authorship of the entry is explicitly noted. Each writer of an entry writes his or her entry with no real sense of the perspectives developed in related or counter-posed entries or the cumulative effect of the entries. Diggory has opted for a different approach. None of the entries are signed. Those who contributed to the volume are listed at the end, but not who wrote which entry. In the Acknowledgments, Diggory notes, “The forms of participation have been so varied, and the stages of revision have been so complex, that it would be inaccurate to attach individual names to particular entries.” Diggory’s “stages of revision,” one suspects, explain why the distinctive voices of his distinguished contributors (a group which includes not only scholars but also poets and small press editors) blend so effectively while avoiding a bland, corporate voice. Similarly, Diggory’s judicious handling of the revisions is most probably a key reason why the entries interweave so productively, rather than standing as isolated little silos of specialized information. Diggory is to be commended for his artful collaboration with his contributors, and the *Encyclopedia of The New York School* exemplifies critical vision, while yet avoiding axe-grinding and critical special pleading. Too many “encyclopedias” are, finally, mind-numbing shipping crates of data. This volume is mind-quickenning, a balanced, insightful, judicious incitement to renewed reading and new lines of reflection.