What does it mean to write poetry after a political caesura? Can poetry help drive political states in one direction or another? To what extent do political changes influence poetry? Is the role of lyric poetry in such political contexts much different from that of prose or drama? In the German-speaking world in the twentieth century, it is difficult to imagine two more meaningful political caesurae than 1945 and 1989-90 (although dates such as 1918, 1933, and 1968 certainly come to mind). As its title implies, Anthony Bushell’s monograph, *Poetry in a Provisional State: The Austrian Lyric 1945-1955*, deals with poetry after 1945 in Austria. Karen Leeder’s edited volume *Schaltstelle: Neue deutsche Lyrik im Dialog*, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with German-language poetry after 1990 and into the twenty-first century.

With his slim volume, Anthony Bushell primarily argues that Austrian poetry from 1945 to 1955—the years in which Austria was occupied by the Allies and was a provisional state—generally looked backwards in an attempt to continue the tradition of Austrian poetry that preceded annexation to National Socialist Germany. Such an attempt is radically different from the movement of German literature in the same period. Postwar German writers saw pre-fascist Germany as leading towards fascism and thus sought to construct something new rather than continuing prewar traditions. In that vein, German writers such as Wolfgang Borchert began experimenting with the

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largely American genre of the short story. On the other hand, many Austrian writers in that period used the genre of poetry (as well as the novel, but not so much the short story), which had been a favored genre of earlier Austrian writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Hugo von Hoffmannsth. Furthermore, such German writers—again Borchert is a prime example—wrote about the horrors of war, whereas Austrian poets largely avoided it. When they did write about war, it was often by allusion to classical wars rather than direct reference to the Second World War. Hardly anything written in Austria could be called Trümmliteratur. This trend persisted, according to Bushell, who argues that “restoration rather than innovation would be the guiding principle of the Second Republic” (p. 34).

In the latter half of the volume, however, Bushell identifies innovative postwar Austrian poets who did in part confront the topic of the Second World War. The first three of these, though, were only peripherally Austrian: Paul Celan grew up in Czernowitz at the edge of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a town that has since been part of Romania and Ukraine; Ingeborg Bachmann spent much of her life in Italy and elsewhere; and Erich Fried lived mainly in England. The other innovative poets whom Bushell mentions mark the end of his periodization, suggesting that Austrian poetry only began to be innovative around the time that Austria became an independent, neutral state (1955). In 1954, H. C. Artmann and a group of young, experimental poets established a poetry journal entitled Alpha. Neue Dichtung. Some of these poets formed a circle that would later become known as the Wiener Gruppe. In contrast to earlier Austrian poets who used dialect to create a nostalgic sense of Heimat, these poets used dialect in order to confront problems of Austrian conservatism. Furthermore, Ernst Jandl, the father of Austrian concrete poetry, published his first volume of poetry, Andere Augen, in 1956.

If much of the Austrian poetry from 1945 to 1955 has been neglected—as the front flap of the volume’s dust jacket indicates—one suspects that the reason for this neglect is that this material is hardly interesting as poetry. Bushell’s real project, it seems, is to define a hole in the history of Austrian poetry—not a time of no poetry, but rather a time of a general lack of innovation in Austrian poetry—in order to illuminate the influential, innovative postwar Austrian poets (Celan, Bachmann, Jandl). Together with the German Gottfried Benn, they determined the most important direction of German-language poetry in the postwar period and beyond. In highlighting the innovation of such poets vis-à-vis the lack of innovation of other early post-war Austrian poets, then, Bushell’s book can, in part, be seen as a prologue to Karen Leeder’s edited volume.

Schaltstelle: Neue deutsche Lyrik im Dialog includes essays, original poetry, and an interview, all of which center around the metaphor of the Schaltstelle, a word difficult to translate into English. Much of the difficulty comes from the fact that the word means so many different things, and many of its most well-known usages come from the natural sciences. The Schaltstelle is a point at which things are altered as they move through it. It is a node, whether temporal, geographical, or otherwise, of transit, transmission, interaction, exchange, illumination, and/or communication. It is simultaneously a caesura and a bridge. To use Gerrit-Jan Berendse’s clever term, Leeder’s volume is about the “Transitorik” of German-language poetry through the Wende of 1989-90 and beyond (p. 73). To be sure, however, the Schaltstelle referred to in the volume is not merely the 1989-90 Wende or any other singular point, but rather is radically plural. It also refers to intertextuality, transitory places such as the body or the Heimat, and even to metaphor, that Schaltstelle of meaning so common to poetry. Leeder compares her notion of the Schaltstelle with two different literary-theoretical models. First, largely because of the scientific connota-
tions, she compares it to Niklas Luhmann's notion of the system or the network. Second, she compares the Schaltstelle to Harold Bloom's poetic relations of influence, especially his notion of the clinamen, in which the poet being influenced also influences his predecessor. Because of the breadth of the term Schaltstelle, one might compare it to Gérard Genette's idea of transtextuality, which is broader than Julia Kristeva's intertextuality and includes, as much as possible, all types of textual relationships.

In addition to exploring the metaphor of the Schaltstelle, Leeder's volume can be seen, in part, as participating in a dialogue about the starkness of the 1989-90 caesura in German literary history. Unlike works that imply a relatively stark caesura, [1] Leeder's volume contests the strength of that break. In this it bears some resemblance to Astrid Köhler's monograph Brückenschläge. Autoren vor und nach der Wiedervereinigung (2007). However, whereas Köhler is primarily concerned with narrative prose, and deals solely with East German authors, the poets covered in Leeder's volume are more varied. Also, Köhler is concerned specifically with the 1989-90 Wende, whereas that is only one of several temporal Schaltstellen to surface in Leeder's volume.

The juxtaposition of Bushell's monograph and Leeder's edited volume reveals a narrative that crosses the two works. As it turns out, many of the German-language poets writing after 1990 have been influenced by the innovative Austrian writers described by Bushell, much more so than by West German poets of the 1968 generation. As Hermann Korte illustrates in his essay for Leeder's volume, younger German-language poets have been influenced by the Wiener Gruppe, Friederike Mayröcker, and Jandl, but especially by Celan. Poets particularly inspired by Celan include Dieter Schlesak, Brigitte Oleschinski, and Peter Waterhouse, the latter of whom has included original poetry in Leeder's volume. In a similar vein to Korte, Georgina Paul's essay examines Mayröcker's influence on East German poet Elke Erb. None of these influences, however, led the latter poets to go back to the poetry of their predecessors, as Bushell's not-so-innovative Austrian poets from 1945 to 1955 did. Instead, their relationships to the work of their predecessors takes place in dialogues. The more recent poets derive inspiration from their predecessors, but adapt that influence into something uniquely their own. Such influences are Schaltstellen in that ideas change in transition. Other essays in the volume, however, show that influences on newer German-language poetry go well beyond those of postwar poets. Strong intertextual elements show up in the majority of the poetry covered in the volume. A small cross-section of influences on that poetry includes Albert Camus and André Breton, William Shakespeare, and even ancient Roman texts.

What Bushell's monograph and Leeder's edited volume show is that the major political caesurae of 1945 and 1989-90 are not quite as sharp in the history of German-language poetry as they may be in the political history of the German-speaking world. Other caesurae in the history of German-language poetry include the rise of innovative Austrian poets around 1955, the rise of the 1968 generation in Germany, and the break with the 1968 generation by later German-language poets. These dates, however, do not tell the entire story of postwar and post-Wende German-language poetry, either. Such a history cannot be described as a linear path with certain breaks in the sidewalk. Instead, that history is a complex web of intertextual relations: in short, a system of Schaltstellen. If a weakness is to found in Leeder's volume, however, it is also its strength: the metaphor of the Schaltstelle itself. What this metaphor achieves in accuracy in describing contemporary German-language poetry, it lacks in precision. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine anything textual that cannot be described as a Schaltstelle. Nonetheless, Leeder's volume brings together an all-star line-up of groundbreaking essays on contemporary German-language poetry. It
is a volume that students of newer German-language poetry will want to keep nearby.

Bushell’s monograph, as mentioned above, provides an excellent prologue to Leeder’s edited volume. However, the monograph is also quite an accomplishment on its own. It identifies the (literary) historical context out of which writers such as Jandl sprang. In doing so, it skillfully straddles the often treacherous cleft between the disciplines of history and literary studies. Students of postwar German-language poetry will want to read the book; so, too, will students of postwar Austrian history or Austrian identity. The manuscript could have used another round of editing, as some passages have missing words and misspellings, for example. This minor flaw, however, does not take much away from the achievement of Bushell’s research.

Note

[1]. One thinks of Stephen Brockmann, Literature and German Reunification (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Stuart Taberner, German Literature of the 1990s and Beyond (Rochester: Camden House, 2005); or Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, and Kristie A. Foell, eds., Textual Responses to German Unification (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001).

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