CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

Now that the succeeding century is well advanced into its first decade, it seems a good time to take a purchase and a perspective on the poetry of the twentieth century. This Companion offers an availably intelligible and stimulating account of the current state of its critical reception, of the issues and challenges to which it gives rise in our own cultural and social climate, and of the various engagements between poetic form and history which it offers as both problems and examples to succeeding poets and readers.

The poetry treated here is 'English' in the sense that it's written in the English language, or versions of it, by poets who are, or were, of English, Scottish or Welsh origin, or have an origin or family attachment overseas but have been resident in Britain or taken British nationality. The place of nation in the construction of personal and poetic identity is itself an issue in some of this work; and the fact that the latter part of the century witnessed a form of the devolution of political power to Scotland and Wales has found effects and emphases in some of the poetry discussed here, and not only poetry from Scotland and Wales.

The Irish story, which of course intersects with these stories at numerous points, is not told here, mainly on the practical grounds that, a separate story too, it is already the subject of Cambridge Companions: one on W. B. Yeats edited by Marjorie Howes, and one entitled *Contemporary Irish Poetry* edited by Matthew Campbell. Even so, Yeats, although he has no essay to himself in this book, is a towering presence within it. Discussions of his place include the elaborately artful self-revisions of his lengthy career, notably those encouraged by Ezra Pound (whose more general place in this story is outlined in several essays in this volume too); his formidable technical expertise and refusal of modernist experimentation; his establishing of the poetic sequence as a highly influential modern form; and the enduring challenge of W. H. Auden's response to him, particularly in his elegy 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', published in 1939, which is cited and discussed several times. The impact of the poetry of Northern Ireland since

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

the mid-1960s, and particularly of the work of Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon, with its transformations of lyric possibility, is made clear in several essays too, as is the significance of the work of Patrick Kavanagh and Austin Clarke as an enabling resource in the evolution of the poetic of the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas. If the Irish story is not told here, then, the ways in which the story that is being told crosses with it are frequently to the fore.

Although T. S. Eliot does not figure individually in this Companion, his varieties of Modernism are, as much as Yeats's influence, crucial to an understanding of the poetry of this period, and the impact of his poetry, his criticism and, indeed, of his person (in his role as an influential publisher of poetry, for instance) are extensively treated in what follows. Aspects of this include his paradoxical similarity to Yeats in his views of poetic tradition and traditional form; his modulation of personae in *Four Quartets* as one of the crucial contributions made by Modernism to the art of poetry; his ambivalent attitude to D. H. Lawrence, which is rich with implication for the entire history of the poetry of the period; and the desire he shares with Lawrence for a newly naked or bare-boned poetry, however differently they actually expressed this desire and wrote out of it. One essayist in this book suggests that English poetry in this period has never 'got over' Auden, and this may well be so. But the evidence punctiliously adduced and construed here suggests, perhaps surprisingly, that it is Eliot who casts the larger shadow across the poetic century.

But Auden's impact is also wide-ranging, sometimes in contradistinction to Eliot's: from his commandeering position in relation to other writing of the 1930s and 1940s, including William Empson's, and his early turning of a newly Modernist poetic towards sociopolitical concerns, through his overwhelming effect on the young Philip Larkin, to his absorption by James Fenton and others in poetry from the 1980s on. It will come as no news, of course, that Yeats, Eliot and Auden have such standing in this story; but it is still compelling to see this manifested in the various ways that it is in these essays.

A Companion such as this, which offers a view of an extensive chronological period and a great variety of published work, must of necessity be selective. But individual essays do consistently pick up and re-examine the terms offered as 'contexts' in the opening section. The volume makes a persistent inquiry – on what is sometimes still virtually a field of battle – into the applicability of the terms 'modern', 'Modernist', and 'postmodern' as ways of understanding the poetry of the twentieth century and its implicit or explicit politics; and also into the comparative merits and value of the work being so defined.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

This inquiry has some salient features to which I think it is worth alerting the prospective reader at the outset. One is the characteristic refusal of contemporary critics to take the Victorians at the modernists' estimate of them, and the consequences of this for more recent writing. To read Victorian poetry as formally innovative and radical is to look more sceptically at the self-justificatory and self-advertising claims of experimental Modernism, and to become more alert to the oedipality of its struggles, while still crediting the remarkable experiments and effects actually demonstrable in Modernist work. In the narrative of inheritance, with its strategies of evasion as well as gratitude, the poetic achievement of the Victorian Gerard Manley Hopkins, and his posthumous publication, reputation and absorption by others, is an especially complicating factor that undermines some clichés of formal radicalism and technical experimentation. Other such factors include the often occluded persistence of influences from both Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walt Whitman.

A further feature of this inquiry is the examination of some ways in which form may be both traditional and radically modern in poets who reject – or just ignore – the radicalism of modernist forms. In some poets of the period – Yeats, for instance, Hardy, Edward Thomas and Charlotte Mew – traditional form may be so originally wrought as to become something quite different from itself and, thereby, a means for the articulation or realisation of things which Modernism itself could not articulate or realise. Proposals such as this – and several of the kind are made in this book – tend to collapse what are coming to seem increasingly jaded or wearyingly *parti pris* hostilities between critical camps of the 'modern' and the 'Modernist'; and that collapse is, invitingly, more of a breakthrough than a breakdown.

And the final feature of inquiry which I will mention here is the one undertaken into what may and may not be allowed to constitute the 'postmodern' in poetry. The essay on the term in the 'Contexts' section of this book holds it sceptically, or 'uneasily', between inverted commas, worries at its elasticity, and offers, as alternatives actually used by poets and critics, the terms 'neo-Modernist' and 'late modernist'. That essay also takes the Movement poets of the 1950s to task for their hostility to Modernism and suggests, rebukingly, that in them we have 'the "postmodernism" we deserve'. Yet the individual essay on Philip Larkin, who is sometimes read as the quintessential 'Movement' poet, on the contrary makes much of his early absorption of Eliot and other Modernists, and also of his assimilations of both Auden and Louis MacNeice. The essay proposes, as a consequence, that Larkin is a much more complex 'late modern' or even 'postmodern' figure, philosophically as well as aesthetically, than he

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

has often appeared, even – perhaps especially – in his own prose statements. There are involving arguments about subjectivity, authenticity and the survival of the lyric 'voice' in all of this, as there are elsewhere in this book too; and such contradictory readings have, I think, a stimulatingly provocative relationship with one another. They contribute to a sense of the permanently uncompleted business that literary criticism – indeed, that reading itself – is, at its best.

Some concluding thoughts. It is notable how frequently in these essays the word 'contradiction' occurs. It is accompanied by many cognates or near-synonyms: 'division', 'fission', 'dissonance', 'ambiguity', 'conceit', 'self-questioning', 'multi-perspectivism', 'difference', 'discrepancy', 'destabilisation', 'hybridity', 'translocation'. And these are joined by a related set of apparently opposed or mutually undermining binaries: 'constraint' and 'liberation'; 'dualism' and 'dialogism'; 'oral' and 'literary'; 'identification' and 'distance'; 'critique' and 'longing'; 'the real self' and 'acting out'. Individual essays also describe articulate anxieties about 'belatedness', 'community' and 'audience', and some define the various kinds of mobility which poets make available to themselves by engaging in translation, version and pastiche – the self-disguise or self-modification of ventriloquism, for instance, and the opportunity for extensions of, or challenges to, cultural or national consciousness. (Christopher Reid's *Katerina Brac*, published in 1985, which is discussed in the essay on 'lyric adaptations', is, among other things, an exquisite set of variations on these themes.)

Literary critics like contradiction, of course, since it feeds the opportunity for exposition and argument on which critical essays tend to depend: criticism needs crisis. Yet I think that the critics gathered here do offer ample evidence that poems of modernity, whether they fall, or may be allowed to fall, under the rubrics of 'modern', 'Modernist' or 'postmodern', characteristically appear to speak against themselves, to engage in sometimes fraught dialogues of the self with the self, or of the poem with its own origins, traditions and generic characteristics. Poems become the scenes of anxieties, tensions, distresses, uncertainties, contentions and mobilities, in relation to what may loosely be labelled as both the private and the public life or sphere. Or, rather, the poem is that place where, in language and form, the private and the public converge or coinhere, where matters of the deepest moment – of sexual, class, national and racial identity, in particular, and occasionally, still, of religious or quasi-religious identity and belief, or of scepticism about or antagonism to it – are approached, acknowledged and articulated at their most subtle and most complicated levels. The poem is not necessarily the place where such contradictions will be resolved or analysed into harmony: indeed, 'resolution' is a word which

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

virtually never figures in these essays, and being painfully on both sides or having it anxiously both ways is something the modern poem also characteristically does. The twentieth-century English poem is the place where urgencies of desire, and responsibilities of acknowledgement, indebtedness, moral choice and witness are brought into focus or relief, brought into play, and brought to book.

And in many modern poems this happens self-consciously: a further continuous thread of critical narrative in what follows has to do with what the poetry, metacritically, has to say about itself, about its own modes and procedures, and about its potential consequences and effects. Eliot in the *Quartets* is there at the Modernist origin of this impulse when, in 'East Coker', he modulates persona as he moves away from traditional form at a point of self-critique: 'That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion.' Auden is crucially there in the Yeats elegy, with its hauntingly ambivalent assertion – if it is an assertion, exactly – that 'poetry makes nothing happen', which has proved a magnet – as a puzzle, a support or a scandal – for subsequent poets and critics. And we find it too, variously, in such places as W. S. Graham's late meditations on the role of language in consciousness; in Philip Larkin's sceptical view of the gap between word and world; in R. S. Thomas's late linguistic self-reflexivity, with its sense of the provisionality of a poetry attempting to chart ultimately elusive realities; in Geoffrey Hill's sceptical placing of the allure of poetry in relation to the allure of theology and religious belief; and in Tony Harrison's insider–outsider status as the combative occupier of canonically exclusionary iambics. Modern poetry, it seems, is nowhere more characteristic of itself than when anxiously but scrupulously doubting itself.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

PART ONE

Contexts

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

1

TIMOTHY WEBB

Victorian to modern

1

In 1886 William Butler Yeats was introduced to Gerard Manley Hopkins in Dublin. Both were to play a significant part in the history of English verse, yet they constitute an ill-matched pair. Hopkins was a Jesuit priest but also an English patriot who felt painfully out of place in Catholic Ireland, whereas the young Yeats was far from orthodox in his religious beliefs, although descended from a Church of Ireland clergyman. When confronted with Hopkins he seems to have experienced a reaction which was predictably Irish and recognisably Protestant: his impression was the usual Irish one that Hopkins was 'a detested aesthete' and that he had brought a 'faint theatrical Catholicism to Ireland'; the Irish, Yeats told Humphry House, apropos of Hopkins, had 'no sympathy with English Aesthetic Catholicism'.[1] Many years later, Yeats wrote about Hopkins as someone 'whom I knew', vacillated about which poems should be included in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* and mis-remembered, or misrepresented, the occasion: 'a boy of seventeen, with Walt Whitman in his pocket, had little interest in a querulous, sensitive scholar.'[2]

Yeats may have had a copy of Whitman in his pocket, a detail intended to suggest a wide gulf of taste, but the example of the American poet seems to have left little trace on his own verse. On the other hand, Hopkins once said that, even if he had only read 'half a dozen pieces at most', 'I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman's mind to be more like my own than any other man's living.'[3] This suggests an undeclared and significant affinity with the poet recognised by D. H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) as 'greatest of the Americans'. Nor was Yeats only seventeen at the time, since he had been born in 1865; yet the instinct to exaggerate his own youthfulness is understandable because, for all his own apparent youth, Hopkins was twice the age of Yeats and destined to die only three years later, whereas Yeats survived till 1939. At the time of the meeting, Yeats had published 'The Two Titans' ('a strained and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

unworkable allegory', opined Hopkins, though not to Yeats's face) and the verse-play *Mosada*; Hopkins was known to be a sensitive figure with pronounced aesthetic predilections yet, at this point, he had published very little; his standing was largely based on his appointment as Professor of Classics at University College Dublin, and he was scarcely known as a poet.

Like so many encounters in literary history, this meeting seems anti-climactic. The case of Hopkins undermines the neat patterns to which literary history sometimes aspires: few of his poems reached print during his own lifetime, though several were included in anthologies, especially by Robert Bridges, who published sixteen of his poems between 1889 and the appearance of his own edition of the *Poems* in 1918 (a second, enlarged edition by Charles Williams appeared in 1930). Publication did not mean immediate acceptance: the first edition sold only 750 copies over the course of ten years.

For some time, Hopkins has been classified as a recognisable product of the Victorian age: in his hearty patriotism; in his aesthetics; in his scientific approach to the 'aspects of things' which, as Patricia Ball has shown,[4] links him both with his Romantic predecessor Coleridge and with his older contemporary Ruskin; in his highly developed interest in language and especially dialect; in his profound interest in religion; in his innocent but powerful sexuality; in his fondness for adjectival affirmation, which sometimes seems to counter the more startling verbal acrobatics of his poetry; in his strong though inquisitively directed preference for the natural world; and in his avoidance of urban realities, even though he lived in Glasgow, Liverpool and Dublin.

Such corrective insistence is justified and salutary; yet it is also worth remembering that, in its linguistic innovations, *Poems* has much in common with the experimental writing of the Modernists and especially with that of James Joyce. For example, Hopkins wrote: 'where, where was a, where was a place?' ('The Wreck of the Deutschland'), and 'his riding / Of the rolling level underneath him steady air' ('The Windhover'), and 'how the boys / With dare and with downdolfinry and bellbright bodies huddling out, / Are earthworld, airworld, waterworld thorough hurled' ('Epithalamion'). Since he died in 1889, and since these quotations date from the 1870s or the 1880s, Hopkins could not have qualified as a Modernist, but his verbal innovations indicate that, even within the confines of Victorian literature, some contributions were strikingly experimental. The case of Hopkins might even lead to a reconsideration of the attributes of what is properly 'Victorian' and of Yeats's famous claim in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* that 'Victorianism had been defeated'.

Several influential modern writers acknowledged its significance. Even if Hopkins was largely dismissed by Ezra Pound (who, like Yeats, had

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

embarrassingly featured in *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*) and, less predictably, T. S. Eliot, he was celebrated by I. A. Richards, William Empson, Robert Graves and W. H. Auden, most of whom were practising poets as well as critics. Auden, in particular, identified Hopkins as a strong but dangerous influence; he once claimed that 'Hopkins ought to be kept on a special shelf like a dirty book.'[5] Although Hopkins had usually worked within the compass of traditional verse form, he was widely associated with innovative poetry, particularly because of his linguistic courage. When F. R. Leavis produced *New Bearings in English Poetry* in 1932, Hopkins was the single focus of its final chapter, largely because of his capacity to admit and enact the realities of struggle. As late as 1936 when Michael Roberts compiled the influential *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, Hopkins was installed as founding father, represented by thirteen poems. (Yeats, who was placed directly after Hopkins, only got eight.)[6] So, through the vagaries of religious restriction and the curious patterns of publication and literary influence, Hopkins was, to some extent, lifted out of his period and connected, positively, with the 'new' and the 'modern'. The Victorian poet became an inspirational model, if not always a direct or immediate poetic influence, on English poetry after the First World War.

The gradual evolution of the poetic standing of Hopkins is an exceptionally good example of the delayed manner in which certain literary reputations are established, long after the death of the poet. The case of Hopkins demonstrates how our sense of a 'Victorian' writer has evolved and achieved greater complexity with the passage of time. With a poetic reputation beyond his own control, he had much in common with Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, poets who had not survived the First World War, but who were accorded the stabilising notice of book publication in the early years of peacetime (Owen in 1920, and Rosenberg in 1922).

In contrast, the route followed by Yeats was strikingly different. Very much not dead, he played a significant part both in keeping his own work before a reading public and in transforming his poetic self over a number of years. Since Yeats has now been dead for more than sixty years, it is easy to fail to notice the significance of this process of change and the centrality of Yeats himself to this extraordinary choreography. Yet the patterns were sometimes surprising and apparently controlled, or at least permitted, by Yeats himself. Take, for instance, these facts assembled by George Bornstein:

> The importance of *Poems* (1895) and its successors to Yeats's public image cannot be overstated. This was the volume by which Yeats was best known to readers for nearly four decades, until the publication of *Collected Poems* in

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-69132-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry
Edited by Neil Corcoran
Excerpt
More information

> 1933. Its first edition of 750 copies ... sold well, as did the American edition. Revised editions appeared in 1899, 1901, 1904, 1908, 1912, 1913 (with further slightly revised impressions in 1919, 1920, 1922 [twice], 1923, and 1924), 1927, and 1929.[7]

With whatever revisions, therefore, this relatively early volume continued to sell well even during the years of the First World War, the Troubles, the Irish Civil War and the first, difficult, years of the Irish Free State, while Yeats was giving expression to an exceptional poetic maturity with the publication of *Responsibilities* (1916), *The Wild Swans At Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and *The Tower* (1928). Yeats was prepared to sanction publication, or re-publication, of poems such as 'Down by the Salley Gardens' (first published, 1889), 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' (first published, 1890), 'The Sorrow of Love' (first published, 1892) and 'Who Goes with Fergus?' (first published, 1892), at the time when he was also writing and publishing such unsparingly modern texts as 'The Second Coming' (first published, 1920; in book form, 1921), 'Sailing to Byzantium' (first published, 1927; in book form, 1928), 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (first published, 1923; in book form, 1924) and 'Leda and the Swan' (first published, 1924; in book form, 1924).

Such apparent clashes and contradictions suggest that Yeats possessed an unusually canny instinct for commercial possibilities though he also may have recognised not so much a blunt disconnection as a process of continuity. Privately, he admitted: 'This book [*Poems* (1895)] for about thirty years brought me ... twenty or thirty times as much as all my other books put together.'[8] He might have wished it otherwise; but there is no evidence that he curtailed or tried to prevent these revealing ambiguities of publication. The record clearly shows that we need to re-examine received notions of the poet putting the past behind him as he rejects the encumbering coat of old mythologies, appearing to move on without a backward glance from a discarded style to the new.

2

The evidence of the early volumes also shows that Yeats was much exercised by the opportunities of ordering the poems in his volumes. This directive input, often radical, revealed much about Yeats and usually carried enduring consequences. As George Bornstein puts it, in examining one notable instance: 'The arrangement of the early lyrics in *Poems* established a paradigm still present even in posthumous arrangements of Yeats's verse.'[9] Perhaps the most famous example of the construction of a volume is exemplified by the carefully planned volume *The Tower* (1928),

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org