Introduction: the poetry wars

Among its lists of publishing opportunities, grants and fellowships, the 2003 edition of *The Writer's Handbook* offers a solemn warning for today's aspiring poet:

> It would be great in 2003 to report an end to the poetry wars. Or indeed the end of any kind of war. But those disagreements on poetic style and metrical direction which began so long ago are still very much around. As ever, the battle is between the insiders and the outsiders, the left vs. the right, with both sides convinced they are the ones who own the true poetic grail. The insiders are the ones who write what new readers often imagine real poetry to be. They are clear, crisp and immediately comprehensible. They represent the Georgian line of narrative in verse that runs from Hardy through Betjeman and Larkin to Tony Harrison, Andrew Motion, Wendy Cope, Carol Ann Duffy, Sean O'Brien and the other bestsellers of the present day. The outsiders are the experimenters, the chancers, those of innovative texts. They are the ones who embraced the difficult modernism of Eliot and Pound and then took poetry off to those rarefied places where, apparently, the public never bother to go. They made it new. Wallace Stevens was central. John Ashbery is his heir. Over here Edwin Morgan, Roy Fisher, Tom Leonard, Allen Fisher and others continue the process. Poetry should be different. It should generate sparks when you engage with it. Comprehension comes later.[1]

It would be nice to imagine the aspiring poet reading this, immediately resolving not to be co-opted by either side, and encouraging herself by the thought of half-a-dozen contemporary poets who don't fit into such either/or generalisations. What would the poetry wars make of Alice Oswald's *Dart*, for example, a complex modernist collage of voices and a Wordsworthian landscape narrative at the same time? Of Paul Muldoon or Derek Walcott, neither 'immediately comprehensible' but both popular by poetry's standards? But the easier it is to show how war is not the answer, the more difficult it becomes to explain how contemporary poetry got itself stuck with such a rigid opposition in the first place. This book is set at the beginning of the poetry wars, the revolutionary decade between

1912 and 1922 when Eliot and Pound introduced the poetic styles and cultural values that would change the rest of the century's poetry for good. Its focus, however, is on the other side, Hardy and the 'Georgian line' of Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, Walter de la Mare and W. H. Davies, poets who read, reviewed and wrote in the context of modernism, but who remained unconverted. How much did the modernist revolution affect them, and how might we read their poetry in its light? Trying to understand what those disagreements about 'poetic style and metrical direction' originally were, though, makes this also a book about what poetic form means, a question debated more forcefully in this period than for the previous hundred years, and one whose disagreements have set the agenda for the next hundred years of the poetry wars. After modernism, it was impossible to think of form as an aesthetic box for the content or to dissociate a rhythm from questions of personal integrity and audience engagement. But although many books have been written about the meanings of modernist form, there are none about what it meant to their non-modernist contemporaries, writers whose work has also mattered a good deal for the century that followed. What did they have to say which could not be said in the forms of their modernist contemporaries?

The fact that there are very few books about the relation of the two sides at all is also a result of the poetry wars, of course. The notion that modernist art was a world whose intellectual and aesthetic concerns were largely unique to itself was encouraged by both modernists and later their opponents, and the division between them has been articulated in various oppositions over the century: popular vs. professional poets, school vs. university, traditional vs. avant-garde, rootedly national vs. exiled international, unified vs. fragmented, formal vs. free. None of these antitheses are true of the situation as it was back in 1912, but if they reflect the basic division that literary criticism has always drawn between modernist poetry and its contemporaries – a division which this study will always have cause to cross – they also indicate how any account of this period always has the rest of the twentieth century peering over its shoulder. Turning to face that century directly, two things seem clear enough. Firstly, that a good deal of great twentieth-century British, Irish and Commonwealth poetry owes as much or more to Thomas and Hardy's example than it does to Pound and Eliot. As the century has progressed, the work of W. H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, to name simply the heavyweights, has testified to their enduring influence and in doing so, shifted the anthologies' centre of gravity: it is noticeable how since the 1970s, almost all have given as much space to Thomas, Hardy

and Owen as to their modernist counterparts. And the same interest is evident in the poetry-reading public; in the 1995 BBC survey of the nation's favourite poems, all of the poets in this volume had entries in the top forty, and apart from Davies, all have been continuously in print since publication.[2] The number of people for whom Thomas and Owen's poetry matters for its own sake means no critical account of the period which leaves them as not-quite-modernists will do them justice. Even when the aim has been to rescue them for a middle ground between conservatism and revolution, that middle is still a degree on the scale set up by the *ne plus ultra* of modernism.[3] By situating their work in its modernist context, my aim is to give the non-modernist poets a place on their own terms.

But secondly, it is also certain that British poetry has been irrevocably changed by modernism. Not only did modernism introduce new styles and languages for poetry, it also ensured that there could be no way to hear the old ones in the same way. A generation later, Philip Larkin was to anathematise Pound and all his works, and his most infamously shocking line, 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad', is in perfect iambic tetrameter. But the poem would not have its Oedipus-for-Dummies mockery were that rhythm not heard as both stupidly obvious and flatly inevitable, and it can be heard as such partly because Pound made the unpredictability and self-direction of free verse a major force in English poetry. If, as Eliot argued in his 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*', free verse's covert reference to the metre it breaks makes it continuous with all traditional poetry, then it follows according to the logic of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that the arrival of free verse has, if ever so slightly, altered the whole tradition of poetry, including the poetry written expressly to ignore it.[4] It is therefore also important not to treat Thomas or Hardy as if they were living in a different world to Pound or Eliot, because modernism caused poetry to be heard differently ever after, and none more so than the work of its contemporaries. This book is an attempt to hear that difference as it emerges.

Writing about modernists and non-modernists together, however, runs almost immediately into a minefield of terminology and personnel, and a long list of writers who should be accounted for but aren't. This study is not a survey of all the different non-modernist poets, or of the many varieties of modernism in Europe and America.[5] Focusing instead on the place and decade when these definitions were first being formulated, it asks how those poets whose work has subsequently become emblematic of the poetry wars actually related to one another. Hence 'modernist' in this

book means largely those Pound saw as part of his movement, the creators of a new sort of verse in and around literary London in the decade of the First World War, and 'non-modernist' means the poets of the same decade (and often the same magazines and the same parties), whom literary history has subsequently opposed to them, only sometimes because the modernists wanted to be remembered like that. This is not to claim that the configurations of the poetry wars are the real and only way to understand modernism in Britain, of course, nor that these particular outsiders to it are the only ones worth studying. Rather than make a general survey of poetic responses to modernism, my aim is to show how vividly the work of these particular poets demonstrates the vicissitudes of the battle that would come to be fought in their name – through its literary impact, in the case of Thomas, Hardy and Owen, and/or the way it exemplifies the twists and turns of the debate over the values of modern poetry, in the case of Davies and de la Mare. Given the charged history of the hundred years since, this dual focus on the poetry as itself and as it has been remembered is unavoidable; the tension between historicity and uniqueness is also, as I shall argue, a major concern for the poets themselves, not least as the question of poetic form. In this sense, the problem of a satisfying collective noun for them is a small but symptomatic one. Calling them simply non-modernists suggests that what they all really had in common were the poets they weren't, which is unfair to their individual positions. Calling them simply Georgians, though, is complicated by history; only two were published Georgians, and the broader sense of 'Georgian' still excludes Hardy, but includes a very wide range of poets, not all of whom knew or liked each other. There were those who were made by their appearance in *Georgian Poetry*, such as Wilfrid Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie and Rupert Brooke; those whose work had been successful beforehand, for example de la Mare and Davies, and those like Edward Thomas and Robert Frost who were friends with the Georgians but disliked much of their poetry. Wilfred Owen called himself a Georgian because he was thrilled to be held peer by Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, although he was actually published in the Sitwells' modernistic anthology *Wheels*. Worse, the word also has to cover the post-war coterie of poets led by J. C. Squire, whose conspicuous anti-modernism attracted some of Eliot's most stinging attacks on Georgian complacency, but who were generally loathed or ignored by the surviving original Georgians.[6] My compromise is to call these poets 'Georgians' when their work is aligned with the general aims of the earlier Georgian anthologies, 'non-modernists' when I need to distinguish their particular

work from the substantial morass of bad poetry in those anthologies, and to give the closest attention I can to the particular affiliations of each poet.

Hopscotching over the terminological cracks like this, though, is itself a consequence of the perpetual tendency of the poetry wars to present the two sides as mirror images of each other, rather than acknowledge the more asymmetrical alignments of the time. What really connected the poets in this study was an intricate, casual and shifting network of friendships, friend-of-friendships and admirations, rather than their following a common style, becoming a self-declared movement like the Imagists, or issuing a counter-modernist manifesto. Partly this is because they did not share an identical relation to individual modernist poets. Hardy had worked out his poetic before Pound or Thomas began to write, and with his mind on the battles of another era, was rather surprised (and pleased) to find out how important his work had become to the generation of the First World War. But while Pound praised his eye on the object, Eliot excoriated him for naked self-absorption.[7] After Owen's death, Eliot admired 'Strange Meeting' (with its uncanny prescience of *The Waste Land*) and Yeats damned him as 'all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick'.[8] Hardly anyone paid attention to Thomas at all. And these divergent reactions indicate the other reason for the absence of a definitive non-modernist movement, the fact that in this decade there was no very clear-cut thing called 'modernism' to defy either.[9] What became modernist and what was left outside it has been to a degree retrospectively defined by the poetry wars, and one of the larger themes this book traces is the degree of contact between groups separated too absolutely by the later needs of such reconstructions, particularly Pound and Eliot's battles with Squire after the war, or Larkin's attempts forty years later to find an English tradition unsullied by modernism. A good recent study shows the poetry wars in action around 1919:

> As many literary historians have observed, one tool moderns used to draw the line [between modernist and non-modernist] was the work of those who had published and represented the values of the relatively traditional work published in Harold Monro's Georgian Anthologies. The critic Arthur Waugh (father of Evelyn), for example, after he had denounced the *Catholic Anthology* (which contained Eliot's 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock') as a collection of 'unmetrical, incoherent banalities' composed by 'literary "Cubists"', argued that 'the humour, commonsense, and artistic judgement of the best of the new "Georgians"' would save contemporary letters. Directly opposing these kinds of sentiments was John Middleton Murry, husband of Katherine Mansfield and editor of the journal *Athenaeum*, in whose pages he regularly attacked Georgian writing. After attending a lecture by Eliot, Murry, undoubtedly agreeing with

Pound's description of Waugh's writing as 'senile slobber', exultingly described the two encamped armies that had gathered at the talk: 'The anti-*Athenaeums* – Munro [*sic*], Jack Squire etc – present in force. There's no doubt it's a fight to the finish between us & Them – them is the "Georgians" en masse.'[10]

Extraordinary what a difference a war makes; in 1912 it had been the editor of the Georgian anthologies, Eddie Marsh, who stepped in to save Murry and Mansfield's little magazine *Rhythm* from bankruptcy. Arthur Waugh's original *Quarterly Review* article bracketed *Georgian Poetry* and the *Catholic Anthology* together in an 'atmosphere of empirical rebellion', whose anarchistic creed it was to 'draw the thing as we see it for the God of things as they are' instead of 'an eternal idea expressed in flawless language', and specifically criticised the Georgians' 'deliberate defiance of metrical tradition', 'incoherent violence' and attempts at free verse.[11] His review began the 'drunken helots' tag that Pound paraded gleefully as evidence of the age's critical stupidity in *The Egoist* and Eliot remembered eighteen years later in *The Use of Poetry*, but it was originally aimed equally at the other side.[12] And Harold Monro actually offered to publish the *Catholic Anthology*, but Pound turned him down since Monro was a contributor to it as well.[13] In addition to *Georgian Poetry*, Monro had published the first Imagist anthology, *Des Imagistes*, followed by Aldington's *Images*, Flint's *Cadences*, and was compiling manuscripts for a Futurist anthology when the War interrupted everything. So when Pound wrote worriedly to John Quinn in 1918 that there was a shortage of modernist French writers, that only Jules Romains 'would be with us, rather than with the Poetry Bookshop and the Georgian Anthologies, Abercrombie Eddie Marsh etc', his neat division of the modernist 'movement' from Monro's Poetry Bookshop/Georgian circle was being strategically forgetful.[14] The Bookshop's lodgings had housed arch-Georgians such as Wilfrid Gibson, but also T. E. Hulme and Jacob Epstein, not to mention the not-yet-famous Wilfred Owen. And it was in the pages of the Bookshop's literary magazines that much of the new modernist programme for poetry had been publicised; Pound's Imagist 'Prolegomena' and the lecture that became Hulme's 'Romanticism and Classicism' were both first printed by Monro's *Poetry Review*, and their work was promoted by the magazine exactly because it was consonant with the ideas about a new, utterly direct, utterly sincere poetry being worked out by non-modernist poets on the same pages. Both purported to loathe the excesses of 'Romanticism' and manifested it at all levels; both wanted an immediate, stripped-down poetry without ornament, and both summed up these tendencies in a crusade against rhetoric, which is the starting-point for this

book. For it is in this struggle against rhetoric that the non-modernists and modernists set the agenda for so much subsequent twentieth-century poetics on both sides of the division, be it Plath's heart-stopping confessions or Auden's light verse, Larkin's aggressive ordinariness or J. H. Prynne's dismantling of humanistic perspective, a development of Eliot's own radical solution of dissolving the boundaries of the individual voice, and with them, the possibility of an original self to be false to.

Demonstrating the poetry wars' shifting battle-lines over common ground, though, invites the charge that this book should have gone further, shown the basic error of being exclusively on one side or the other, and paid much more attention to great poets who in some degree belong to both, such as D. H. Lawrence, Robert Graves, Charlotte Mew, or W. B. Yeats. Although my approach is basically sympathetic to such peace-making ideals, the division between modernist poetry and its contemporaries that crystallised around these problems of rhetoric and integrity was a real one, even if the answers do not correspond exactly to the official affiliations of the protagonists, and any dissolving of oppositions needs first to explain the force with which they operated in this first decade or so. Certainly, the values of one side reappear translated into the vocabulary of the other (the Imagist-style justifications for W. H. Davies discussed in chapter 4, for example), but equally certainly, the quest to eliminate rhetoric involves a number of values that are not always consistent: private integrity and public communicability, for example, or authenticity and transparency. What modernists and non-modernists share is more a common set of problems to do with these issues of autonomy and engagement bequeathed them by the Romantic poets, and any attempt to claim a middle ground has first to recognise the seriousness of the different answers and their far-reaching implications. It is the arguments about rhetoric, for example, that underpin the disagreements about metrical direction rather than the other way round. However tempting it is to caricature the relationship between modernist and non-modernist poets as a simple opposition between free-verse poets committed to creative liberty and law-abiding formalists, the opposition will not hold: Thomas and Owen wrote free verse, and even Abercrombie, Pound's literary *bête-noire*, tried his hand at a series of haiku and unrhymed odes (one even had a Greek title) which were only published posthumously.[15] And of course Pound and Eliot wrote free verse, formally regular verse and all shades in between. In fact, in 1917 when they first properly accused their Georgian contemporaries of rhetoric and justified their own poetics by its elimination, those poetics were then the return

to classicism, 'rhyme and regular strophes' as Pound recalled it, not free verse.[16] The opposition between free and formal in this era is actually only one version of the more fundamental argument about the poet's integrity expressed in the *Poetry Review*; rhetoric, in its pejorative post-Romantic sense, implies a gap between inner core and outer expression, the essential and the excessive, an inorganic relation of language to thought. It was by convicting the Georgian anthologies of rhetoric that modernism made critical opinion lose interest in them and anyone associated with them, and so successful was this attack that for decades afterwards, non-modernist poets had to be divorced from Georgian poetry to be taken seriously. Even when Ross and Stead wrote books designed to rehabilitate the Georgians in the 1960s, they chose to emphasise Georgian directness and fidelity to actual experience in concrete language – naturalising, in other words, the values of Imagism at the same time as they were describing an alternative to it.[17] Important as these studies were in giving Hardy or Thomas a literary context of which they did not have to be ashamed, they also ducked the larger issue as to what 'rhetoric' actually means, and what being free from it would entail. This is the story of the first chapter, which traces the way certain key modernist ideas about avoiding it – the Image, 'Classicism', the fragment and the Tradition – have their roots in the Romantic demand that poetry's form express perfect self-determination, a freedom from any influence or law outside the poem. But by writing a poetry that in the context of modernist demands cannot but look artificial, generic or forced, poets like Thomas and Hardy register the problems of agency this autonomous poetic entails, as Wordsworth had made it uncomfortably present for Coleridge a hundred years before. Their work registers the perpetual struggle with what was not chosen but contingent, with exterior influence, and their tangled relations of dependence and freedom, private and public are the theme of the chapters that follow. For the question of how much one chooses and how much one is pushed, how much one acts and how much acted through is crucial for Hardy's poems about guilt and responsibility, for de la Mare's exploration of the haunting power of poetry, for Edward Thomas deciding whether to go to the front or not, and for Wilfred Owen, facing the appalling consequences of doing so.

Given his importance for Pound and Eliot *and* his principled defence of formal pattern, a century's hindsight might interrupt here to suggest that since Yeats's poetry has been such a monumental influence for poets on both sides of the poetry wars, his theories about poetic form (in development throughout the period here, although most publicly formulated

only in 1937 as the *General Introduction for my Work*) must surely transcend the division, and offer the best hope for common ground. But although proper discussion of their complex of politics, philosophy and occultism would require an entire book to itself, a brief survey may illustrate what is at stake in my reading of Owen or Hardy's form as a site of historical conflict, rather than its resolution, and why Yeats is not the mediator he appears in this respect. Despite his friendship with Pound, Yeats disliked the latter's free verse, and defended the necessary artifice of traditional forms because he felt their impersonal patterns enabled the artist to transcend his contingent, changing self, whereas free verse simply reproduced the moment as it was: 'If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accidence, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egoism and indiscretion. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional.'[18]

The direction of Yeats's next few sentences, however, illustrates why this argument is rather closer to Pound's programme than might be supposed, for his justification of traditional forms is based on a metaphysic much more akin to the multiple voices of Pound's montage and the impersonal ideal of Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

> Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing. The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death. . . The supernatural is present, cold winds blow across our hands, upon our faces, the thermometer falls, and because of that cold we are hated by journalists and groundlings. There may be in this or that detail painful tragedy, but in the whole work none. (522–3)

The crowd and the individual voice seem equal and simultaneous possibilities here, with the result that, like Pound's justifications for free verse, Yeats's traditional forms also rule the possibility of rhetoric out of court, only this time by *dissolving* the boundaries of self and crowd, original and copy, living and dead into a greater whole. For him, traditional form is not the heteronomous constraint on self-expression the free versifiers declared, but a ritual which introduces the real occult forces that underlie all existence; patterns which allow the self to play out a psychic drama with its spiritual opposites/doubles/unconscious and thus manifest in the well-formed poem the energy of those trans-historical oppositions that organise Yeats's cosmogony. The occult theology behind these conflicts thus has a profound effect on their concept of finite agency, particularly visible in Yeats's insistence that the privations of personal suffering

are details and should never affect the completed whole. In a move echoing modernism's shift from Imagism to 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' discussed in chapter 1, Yeats rejects the autonomous, singular self of free verse (as did Thomas, Hardy or Owen) only to replace it with a dramatic self which, in its dyadic struggle with its anti-self, 'the being that bears my likeness but is without weariness or trivial desires', becomes reborn as 'something intended, complete', unified and autonomous.[19] When *A Vision* describes this principle of unity-in-opposition throughout the revolving phases of world history, their centre is the phase of 'unity of being', which is tellingly described as the acceptance of this 'struggle with no conquest', a state where 'fate and freedom are not to be distinguished'.[20] Here the dramatic, apparently contested conception of self through traditional form becomes a unity where there is no division between interior and exterior, compulsion and freedom; if rhetoric is what results from the quarrel with others, as Yeats famously remarked, then implicitly otherness is what has been removed here in order to have the quarrel with self that produces poetry. By contrast, Hardy, Thomas or Owen's work presents situations where its speakers are vulnerable, where the forces of heteronomy (death, war, time) are not symmetrical to those selves or recuperable by any transcendental opposition (which is why Yeats so disliked Owen's verse) – and consequently, where the form may not fit, where rhetoric is a structural possibility, exactly because this disparity is the price of poetic selves being finite, contingent and fallible.[21]

These questions of agency and integrity are also at the heart of the sociological disagreements over difficulty, popularity and nationhood that were to prove so important for the next phase of the poetry wars. *Georgian Poetry* was commercially successful and artistically bankrupt, Eliot had argued in various settings between 1919 and 1922, because it pandered to 'the General Reading Public, which knows no tradition, and loves staleness'.[22] It was a travesty of true artistic integrity because it was dominated by the middle-class, insular, mass-produced sensibilities it was written for; difficult, professional poetry, on the other hand, would resist exactly those homogenising blandishments by opening poetry to new influences and forms. The egalitarian climate of post-war Britain, however, did not see popularity with the ordinary reader as a hindrance, and the rise of the Movement poets provided artistic justification for a reassessment of modernist values – but, ironically, using exactly the same principles of self-determining integrity reapplied to the borders of the public, rather than the borders of the individual talent. The reappraisals of Davies, de la Mare, Owen, Hardy and Thomas collected in Larkin's *Required Writing*