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Excerpt

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EDWARD LARRISSY

Introduction

A plausible starting point for a volume dealing with British poetry of the latter half of the twentieth century might be the early fifties, with the advent of the 'Movement' announcing a new dry tone, often ironic and sometimes disillusioned, appropriate to a society which had undergone a war that came to the heart of its cities, and to a nation whose empire was vanishing. Yet the Movement cannot be separated from the literary world which preceded it: its critical ideas centred on a reaction against the supposed 'Neo-Romanticism' of the forties; while on the other hand its productions included distinct traces of the poetics it was supposedly erasing. The Romanticism of Larkin's *The North Ship* (1945) persists in subtle and attenuated form in the bleak plangency of his 'less deceived' Movement period. John Wain's early poetic line is palpably indebted to Dylan Thomas. Thom Gunn's loyalty to Reason begins its career in an obviously Byronic mode: this is as true of his leather-clad motorcyclists or his portrayal of Elvis Presley as it is of his sketch of Byron in his sonnet 'Lerici'.¹ And at the same time it is possible to make a balancing point in the other direction. Few would now accept the partisan jibes flung at Thomas, which portray him as a free-associating visionary, drunk on high-sounding verbiage. As William Empson recognised, Thomas believed a poem should go through the head as well as the heart, and he learnt very deliberately from Donne and Eliot.² As for W. S. Graham, his contemporary rehabilitation stresses the linguistic self-consciousness and craft which are themselves a major topic of his poems.

Such balanced judgment is essential to the achievement of a more objective view of the poetry of the times, one that is not blinded by the critical war cries which belong more appropriately to the literary history of coteries and movements, but whose descriptive value is innately partial and distorting. Yet the truth which inflects the war cries must also be acknowledged. There is no doubt but that Thomas was a poet who did indeed believe in the Romantic topos of a consciousness enlarged and saved by imagination, and whose most profound poetic debts were to Blake and Wordsworth,

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not to Donne and Eliot. Poets such as Kathleen Raine, George Barker and John Heath-Stubbs also looked to Romantic models and notions. The forties saw the publication of a major work by an American poet, long resident in London, H. D., whose *Trilogy* was published by Oxford University Press as *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945) and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946). While couched in the tough but haunting music of a disciplined free verse, its theme, resolutely and ingeniously pursued, is the ultimate victory of imagination over the destructive spirit of warfare.

Equally, it remains undeniable that Reason was the Movement poets' watchword, and that in its name they fostered a style of clear, rational discursiveness which Donald Davie would sum up as 'urbanity'.³ And while some may decry the fact, the Movement style has had the most lasting and widely-spread influence on subsequent mainstream poetry, even if it has not had the field to itself. From Derek Mahon to Carol Ann Duffy, and across many points in between (including the point occupied by Tony Harrison) runs a line of lucid craft and rationality which takes its origin in the Movement and which does not have much in common with the Romantic themes and manner which preceded it. Furthermore, the style of poets such as Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison, who attempt to contrast the Movement with the linguistic self-consciousness they claim for themselves, is immediately recognisable as post-Movement. This dominance provides another light by which to comprehend the ascendancy of Larkin, who was incisively and sympathetically commemorated by Motion himself in his biography of the poet.⁴

To note this dominance is to run the risk of turning the publication of the first of Robert Conquest's *New Lines* anthologies (1956) into a moment of revolutionary rupture.⁵ However, another balancing point to make is that the Movement poets had obvious ancestors, both immediate and more remote. Among the former, one might note poets such as Alun Lewis or Keith Douglas, both of whom died in the Second World War. Douglas, in particular, had fervent admirers in the years that ensued, among them Ted Hughes. Nor, for many readers of the time – probably the majority – would any revolution have been apparent in any case: revolutions are often noticed or constructed after the event. For a large number of readers, the publication of Auden's *Nones* (New York, 1951; London, 1952) and *The Shield of Achilles* (1955), or of MacNeice's *Autumn Sequel* (1954) and *Visitations* (1957), would have been the most significant events. The works of their Oxford friend John Betjeman constituted cherished reading for many, including those who did not usually keep up with poetry. His *Collected Poems* (1958) was a big seller. While his poems present few major challenges

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to the reader, their indebtedness to Kipling and Hardy may help to remind us of characteristics they share with the works of ‘Movement’ poets who incur a similar debt: Kingsley Amis or Larkin.

In any case, there are other ways in which the Movement did not have the field to itself. For those who desired the continuation of Modernist techniques and points of view, the publication of David Jones’s *The Anathémata* in 1952 offered an ambitious palimpsest history of Britain, ordered according to Jones’s mystical Catholic beliefs, which were fashioned into a principle giving shape also to past mythologies, principally the Celtic, in a manner analogous to what Eliot did. MacDiarmid’s *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955) is open to a range of discourses, scientific, economic and political, which were effectively excluded from poetry by the Movement style. In 1960, the appearance of Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* confirmed the continuation of the Modernist line, waiting to be picked up by younger poets such as Tom Pickard. Another new Modernist, Charles Tomlinson, castigated the formal banality and narrow horizons, as he saw them, of the Movement poets, whose presiding genius he identified as ‘The Middlebrow Muse’.⁶ Tomlinson’s own poetic debts ranged from Pound and the French Symbolists to the works of George Oppen and of the American Black Mountain school. But his poetry of the fifties and sixties centres on an implicit debate between the contrasting tenets and methods of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. These were different and more exotic lights from those which guided many of the poets who wrote for the major British publishing houses, though there were others who also sought inspiration beyond the insular – Christopher Middleton and Michael Hamburger, for instance.

What generalisations can one make which could bring together the fifties and the years that follow? There is often a tension either within a poet’s oeuvre, or as between one poet and another, between a gesture towards myth-making and a more empirical temper. The myth-makers are attempting something more provisional than might have been tried by the Romantics or the Modernists: there is not much hope of systematising Hughes’s *Crow*. But this provisionality may reveal the hidden link between empiricism and myth-making in the search for adequate sense-making. The empirical temper pretends to register a believable world, the myth-maker to endow it with order – but not so ambitiously and schematically that it would run the risk of looking absurd or totalitarian to sceptical contemporary readers. In this provisionality lies one possible use for a word one cannot avoid in this context, ‘postmodern’ – though not necessarily for the word ‘postmodernist.’ The latter term tends to come with certain expectations about an ambitious subversion of formal as well as sense-making expectations; the former is easier to see in terms of the governing tone of a whole period: ironic, sceptical

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and above all conscious of the registers, discourses and dictions which may shape consciousness. But the whole question of giving an account of the world can also be related, among some poets, to the topic of Britain's loss of empire and sense of uncertainty as to the new identity it might gain. Such a claim can be made to sound like a subtopic of vulgar Marxism, but there is sufficient evidence that the Condition of Britain (or is it England?) was self-consciously broached by a number of leading poets. For instance, myth can be rooted in the far past of Britain. This is obviously the case with David Jones. But Hughes thought of Crow in relation to the Celtic god Bran, and Hill's *Mercian Hymns* uses a kind of 'mythic method' to make the Anglian King Offa into an ancestor of English traditions. Bunting's *Briggflatts* looks to the Celtic, Norse and Anglian deep past to find antecedents for a tone and structure of feeling. By contrast with these portentous backgrounds, the more unambitious and ironic style, at least at the inception of the Movement, can be seen as an attempt to shuffle off the vaunting claims of empire along with the dangerous Romantic themes of totalitarianism. Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and Donald Davie were quite obviously concerned to present and analyse the distinctive feel of post-war Britain, while in a poem such as 'MCMXIV' Larkin laments the death of an older Britain. A. Alvarez's plea in the foreword to his Penguin anthology, *The New Poetry* (1962, 2nd rev. edn. 1966) that British poets should cast off a disabling 'gentility' can in part be seen as encouragement to rediscover lost confidence. Slightly more recently, a poem such as Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat* (1975) or his collection *Suicide Bridge* (1979), offered a postmodern (in the sense outlined) and anti-imperial interpretation of London and Britain in terms of Celtic and Blakean mythology. They were published by Sinclair's significantly named 'Albion Village Press.' There are ways of effectively capturing a national spirit which eschew these large and venerable tableaux. Alice Oswald's *Dart* (2002) is sensitive in detail to the particular history of Devon communities, and also to the wildlife and ecology of which they form part. While undeniably English, this landscape is registered as regional and idiosyncratic.

What nation, then, are we talking about? The truth is that in the last paragraph we have been talking mainly about English poets, apart from the Anglo-Welsh David Jones. Even to concede, as one must, that Hughes and Hill are as much concerned with England as with Britain serves as a reminder that poets from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are going to have their own sense of nationality. And here one thinks straight away of the controversy likely to be aroused by including Northern Ireland under the heading of 'Britain'. This was notoriously the case with the Morrison and Motion *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982). Leaving

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aside the relevant point that Northern Ireland currently forms part of the United Kingdom and enjoys the connections that come with that fact, a partial response can be framed in empirical terms: many of the poets to come out of Northern Ireland since the mid-sixties were first published by major British publishing houses, and were themselves of a calibre to command the attention and study of British poets and readers. There is another answer, more principled perhaps, but also partial, which would offer a reminder that nationality constitutes no mystical essence. Some Northern Irish poets may espouse an Irish national identity, but if they have become significant agents in a British context, then they cannot be ignored in a volume such as this. The reception of poetry in the Republic of Ireland, by contrast, has created almost a different canon from that which is on offer in the United Kingdom. There Patrick Kavanagh and Thomas Kinsella, say, enjoy a prominence which they deserve to have in Britain, but have demonstrably lacked, at least until recently. In Ireland, poets and readers still remember the names of Thomas MacGreevy, Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin, Irish Modernists largely forgotten in Britain. Seamus Heaney shares with some of his British contemporaries that veering between the empirical (life as it really was on the farm) and the myth-making (the Bog Poems as presided over by a vengeful goddess). But we are dealing with the matter of Ireland, and not so obviously that of Britain. Yet the national questions that affect relationships across our archipelago cannot be so easily shuffled off in the case of Heaney. His learned consciousness of the history of the English language in Ireland is inflected by the wider political and social context of English and Scottish influences in Ireland. This is, in fact, a characteristically Northern Irish perspective, within which his triumphant translation of *Beowulf* (1999) is the statement of a share in the ownership of a tradition. These aspects of Heaney, rather than confirming him as irretrievably different because Irish, help to validate his inclusion, and that of Northern Ireland, in this volume.

There are no cut-and-dried answers to these questions about how to pigeonhole national identity, but the attempt to defer to it in an a priori way can lead to inconsistency. Gerard Carruthers discusses the stance taken by Don Paterson and Charles Simic in *New British Poetry* (2004) as follows:

When Paterson (and Simic) exclude Ulster poets from the collection, they make the case that most of these self-identify as Irish, and they would not wish to appropriate these writers to Britain or the UK. But what about those they include, such as Paterson's close colleague Robert Crawford, who would primarily self-identify as Scottish?⁷

It seems better to pay heed to the many-faceted and constantly evolving contexts constituted by publishers, readers, reviewers, workshops, universities,

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performance venues and arts-funding bodies, which allow one to talk, with due caution, in terms of an entity such as ‘Britain.’ Such caution is nowhere more necessary than when dealing separately with ‘Black British Poetry’. It seems clear that due attention should long ago have been accorded to a poet such as John Agard, and not only to him. Yet the sidelining is itself now part of the subject, as is the postcolonial experience which conditions the writing.

Leaving aside national questions, the mythopoeic poetry of the period serves as a reminder that, while it may be true that the Movement has exerted a far-reaching influence on the subsequent history of poetry, this has often been felt as a constraint, for myth was not the Movement thing. Alvarez had castigated the gentility of British poets, and he had the Movement in his sights. Ian Hamilton, as editor first of *The Review* (1962–72) and then *The New Review* (1974–79), encouraged a style in which emotion was concentrated in compact and finely-judged phrasing, and this distilled and chaste lyricism was seen as distinctive. Yet ‘control’ was one of Hamilton’s highest values, and it is open to question how profoundly his own manner and tone should really be differentiated from that of a Movement poet such as Elizabeth Jennings, if one leaves to one side the fact that Jennings tends to rhyme while Hamilton tends not to. Two decades after Alvarez’s Penguin anthology, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, in their *Penguin Book* (1982), claimed to represent a more politically self-conscious and linguistically adventurous poetry than Alvarez had been able either to promote or to oppose. There is some truth in their claim, but it seems like a decidedly relative matter.

Still, the more thematically and/or linguistically adventurous poetry of the period is saddled with a problem characteristic of poetry in the modern age: the need to find an original poetic language, capable of handling the big questions, while not lapsing into abstraction or generality, or alternatively succumbing to the temptations of irresponsible ‘poetic’ gesture. This is the more linguistic question which is related to the larger-scale one about veering between empiricism and myth. And it needs to be put in this way, since the terms of debate should pay heed to the formal ruses of poetry and to its transformation of language, and not just to thematic questions. Geoffrey Hill is a salient example of a poet whose sense of the need to grapple with the problem of a responsible and adequate language informs his method and is itself part of the subject matter of his poetry. His 2001 volume, *Speech! Speech!*, foregrounds the topic. David Trotter, in *The Making of the Reader* (1984), recognised the way this question has weighed on modern and contemporary poets, and saw it as modified in the post-war period by the quality of the teaching of poetry in schools and universities.⁸ Modernist poets

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had already been seeking to guide their readers towards an understanding of a particular and innovative array of techniques. In the post-war period, poets are exceptionally aware of the way in which such guidance could be a subject of discussion in the tutorial. According to Trotter, while there is a hot-house tendency towards the gestation of unique and original methods, there has also been a tendency to over-identify poetry with simile (the most obvious figure for novel perception), a tendency he sees as particularly acute in the phenomenon of the ‘Metaphor Men’ as they came to be known in the early 1980s: Christopher Reid, Craig Raine and David Sweetman.⁹ Indeed, contemporary poetry plays itself out on this terrain of ambitious modernist views and ingeniously accurate simile. The reader will note that this could be seen as another way of conceiving the ‘myth versus empiricism’ couple.

The identification, in the period of the so-called Metaphor Men, of poetry with the striking use of simile was seen by at least one critic in terms of the easy gratification sought by a consumer society.¹⁰ Whether or not this is a valid connection, the claim does not establish that good poetry could not emerge from such a supposedly inauspicious context. The real target of the critique is a supposed superficiality and narrowness: superficiality of the presentation of experience; narrowness of linguistic register and of intellectual and cultural horizons. Questions about the degree to which poetry might be identified with a facile technique and world view may assume added passion when related questions are asked about the proliferation of creative writing courses in universities. It may be an obvious question, but it is well worth investigating: are these courses encouraging the large-scale production of inoffensive but predictable poetry? Whatever the answer to this question, there is no doubt but that universities have become ever more significant as ‘singing schools’ in the past decade. At their most adventurous, they can support a wide range of interconnected and mutually enhancing activities: the creative writing class, the poetry workshop, the poetry reading, the literary journal or review, links to the literary criticism classes taught elsewhere in the curriculum, and a two-way street to the cultural life of the city outside the university walls. In some cases, a university is drawing upon and developing an honourable tradition of patronage of the arts, and of the formation of poetry workshops on the fringes of university English departments. These drew their membership both from within and from outside academia. This is a story of city and university, and in some cases – Leeds and Belfast, for instance – it begins quite early in our period.

The subject of technical superficiality returns us to our question about how far the language of poetry can address large philosophical or political questions and make these seem to matter to the reader. Recently, Natalie Pollard has made this question the subject of an important book, *Speaking*

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to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address.¹¹ In relation to the work of Geoffrey Hill, W. S. Graham, C. H. Sisson and Don Paterson, she fastens on one major aspect of this question: the pervasive device of the lyric ‘you’, which serves as a way of weaving together the public and the subjective registers of poetry. It may also be a way of underlining the situatedness of both poet and reader as speaking subjects in a particular nation, region or community. But the question whether or not British poetry has been able to find a style adequate to serious reflection had been answered in a more sceptical way by some of the poets and critics associated with the ‘British Poetry Revival’ of the sixties and seventies.¹² A central point in the objection to what some of the critics persisted in calling ‘establishment’ poetry was the way that, whether making grand imaginative gestures or signalling its accuracy of perception, it defined poetry as having a special language, separate from a range of familiar discourses and even modes of expression. If the dictions of science, economics and sociology were somehow inappropriate, overt expressions of feeling, if not tethered to ‘objects’, were simply not the done thing. And yet the discourse of intelligent and enquiring people, outside the sphere of poetry, might veer in either or both directions without embarrassment. One of the arguments often made in favour of the early work, at least, of J. H. Prynne is to do with its deployment of a wide range of registers.

Apart from raising questions about the nature of contemporary poetic language, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* initiated a debate about who was in and who was out. Many commentators at the time and since have remarked on the highly selective character of this anthology, which for instance ignored some excellent poetry by black and women writers. A new openness was apparently signalled by an influential anthology from Bloodaxe in 1993: *The New Poetry*, edited by Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley. In their introduction, the editors announced that ‘plurality has flourished’.¹³ Yet it might be claimed that the characteristics of the poetry represented therein were not markedly different from those of the poetry in Morrison and Motion – and the same might be said, allowing for a slightly different selection of poets, about *New British Poetry*, edited by Don Paterson and Charles Simic in 2004.¹⁴ Nevertheless, a sense that there have been too many exclusions in British poetry is gaining ground among many readers and in the academy. This sense benefits not only women poets, or black British poets, but also those associated with the avant-garde and experimental, who have sought to extend the formal and thematic scope of poetry by recourse either to American models, or to theories which have made of art an engine of the political remoulding of consciousness. The field of possibility is more open and various than it has been for many years.

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NOTES

- 1 Thom Gunn, *Fighting Terms*, 2nd edn. (London: Faber, 1962), p. 27. (1st edn., Oxford: Fantasy Press, 1954).
- 2 See Edward Larrissy, 'Languages of Modernism', *Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 137.
- 3 Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), p. 133.
- 4 Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber, 1993).
- 5 Robert Conquest, *New Lines: Poets of the 1950s* (London: Macmillan, 1956).
- 6 Charles Tomlinson, 'The Middlebrow Muse', *Essays in Criticism*, 7:2 (1957), 208–17.
- 7 Gerard Carruthers, 'Scotland, Britain and the Elsewhere of Poetry', *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 89.
- 8 David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 2, 242–50.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 248–50.
- 10 Andrew Crozier, 'Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism', in *Society and Literature 1945–1979*, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 199–233.
- 11 Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 12 Disagreements between 'innovative' poets and those of a more conservative disposition issued in a memorable feud within the Poetry Society, especially about its organ, *Poetry Review*, which for a time in the seventies was edited by Eric Mottram, who was particularly influenced by the Beats and by the American Black Mountain School. See Peter Barry, *The Battle of Earl's Court* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
- 13 Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley, eds., *The New Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 15.
- 14 Don Paterson and Charles Simic, eds., *New British Poetry* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004).

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C. D. BLANTON

Poets of the Forties and Early Fifties:
The Last Romantics?

It is not quite true that the century's second European cataclysm produced no important poetry in English or in Britain. From 1939 to 1945, the poetic generation formed during the First World War found itself caught up once again, but at a distance: T. S. Eliot straining for orthodoxy in London; Ezra Pound spewing propaganda from Rapallo, then returning to verse from a cage near Pisa, largely broken by the experience. A younger generation, formed by the uneasy history of the interwar years, measured its distances too: from self-imposed exile, like W. H. Auden, or somewhere within the civilian bureaucratic apparatus spawned by the war, like most of his comrades. By 1939, older and younger poets alike had been charting war's approach for some time, nervously watching Spain and China and Munich, suggesting that (as a large abstraction at least) the war might be experienced in advance.

It is certainly true, however, that the Second World War somehow failed to offer itself as the substance of lyric experience as easily as the first had once done, somehow preserving lyric itself as the soldier's grim expressive privilege: the vehicle best suited to the otherwise unspeakable facts and symbolic implications of the trench. High modernism's adaptation of French symbolist obliquities to an indirect and allusive style of historical commentary, in W. B. Yeats's strident last work or Eliot's more meditative late style, the Pylon poets' reclamation of a more urgently political style; both unquestionably served, in different ways, to comprehend the war's approach through the 1930s, occasionally to analyse the crises and social contradictions that produced it, but they could do little to express it as an arrived and experienced fact.

And that is, perhaps, the problem. Harder to describe, more difficult to grasp whole, often admitting no gap between civilians and combatants, less measurable *as* individual experience, the second war often seems to reveal a formal inadequacy, some deficit in the available resources of poetic language. Writing during Dunkirk's evacuation, Herbert Read, a poet from the earlier