Introduction

The aim of this book is to offer an introduction to the world of contemporary poetry, that is, poetry written and published since 1990, and the central image will be that of a voyage of discovery. The two companions whom I have chosen for this venture are Ruth Padel and Peter Robinson and I strongly urge readers to obtain the two texts to which I shall be making reference throughout the journey, Ruth Padel's *The Poem and the Journey* and Peter Robinson's *Talk about Poetry – Conversations on the Art*. Ruth Padel calls the act of reading poetry 'a necessary art' which enriches what goes on inside us, fortifying our inwardness; her book offers a close reading of sixty modern poems. Peter Robinson's book is a collection of eleven interviews or 'conversations' about writing poetry.

This brief guide is about the act of reading complex poetry and coming to terms with the immediate difficulties it presents. With that in mind, it might be worth considering the following basic rules:

- do not expect a poem's complexities to be understood at a quick glance
- we share a common language and need to look carefully at what words mean
- sometimes we can feel the powerful emotion in a piece of poetry without being able to say immediately precisely how it works.

One other central piece of advice is a quotation from T.S. Eliot: 'We learn what poetry is – if we ever learn – from reading it.'

Peter Robinson says, in the first of his *Conversations*, 'Poems, for me, come out of the circumstances of life', and in an earlier book of criticism about poems and poets, *In the Circumstances*, he suggests that poetry is 'a response to other lives and the otherness of those lives'. In the second of his *Conversations*, Robinson is asked about 'silences' or 'those moments when language falters or fails' and his reply is important:

> Yes, silences are places where poetry starts and stops, where taboo subjects wait to be touched on. If there's something that can't be said, poetry might try to make it sayable, or find a way of pointing to what remains to be intuited.

Although the circumstances of life, personal experience, may well be the starting-point for a poet, Robinson also emphasises how 'poems need to stand relatively alone' and he calls upon his experiences as a university teacher in Japan to emphasise this:

> In formal gardens here they have a bamboo device that sends a drop of water into a pond at intervals just to emphasise the silence.

This idea and its relation to a haiku by the Japanese poet, Matsuo Basho, is further explored in Part 5 (pages 114–116).

Robinson also suggests that inspiration comes from ordinary events and occasions. The truth of this can be seen in Barry MacSweeney's poem 'I Looked Down on a Child Today' (Part 3, page 76), written after witnessing a fatal road accident in Newcastle-on-Tyne.

There are challenges to tradition which occupy the centre ground of today's poetry world and they involve the increasing use of the Internet for publication and the arrival of print-on-demand books from Salt Publishing and Shearsman Books. The Poetry Society now embraces new media with a brand new series of podcasts. As is suggested by Tom Chivers, director of *Penned in the Margins,* the podcast can be streamed online or downloaded onto a portable media player.

The reference to podcasts brings to the fore the connection between poetry and music. Ruth Padel recalls once hearing the Scottish poet, John Burnside, saying 'When I read a poem that turns me on, it isn't accessible at once. There's a mystery to it. What draws you in is the music.' In his third *Conversation*, Robinson is asked about the difference between writing poetry and writing prose; his reply refers to the condition of music:

> The difference, as far as I am concerned, lies in the distinction that some have noted between composing and writing. Poetry, as I understand it, cannot be just written. It has to form itself as rhythmical units, preferably in the head, sometimes on paper. These rhythmical units, phrases or sentences, with or without an enjambed turn or two, are intolerant of 'filler': they can't be mashed into whatever grammatical shape I happen to fancy. Nor do they incline themselves to fit into a predetermined stanza-form. Finding the shape and the grammar involves discovering what the phrases mean to say, where they need to go, what they're telling me.

The poet is suggesting here that he needs to listen, to be attentive to what is being sounded or, as he puts it later in the same conversation, 'learning to recognise words making themselves felt, and developing means for responding to them'. There is an echo here of Charles Tomlinson's poem, 'Aesthetic', from his early volume *The Necklace* (1955), which announced a new voice in English poetry at that time:

> Reality is to be sought, not in concrete,
> But in space made articulate

The idea of giving voice to 'space' suggests that the gaps between things are what give the objects definition, just as the space between musical notes is central to the whole structure. Music is made up not only of notes, but of the spaces and gaps between notes. A little like the Basho haiku referred to in Part 5, sound and silence both take their force from being placed side by side. John Cage, the American composer, went so far as to create a composition which defied the expected

routines of what music should consist of. *4'33"*, written in 1952, was a musical 'happening' where a formally-dressed pianist went on to the stage, sat at a grand piano, opened the lid and sat quietly for four minutes and thirty-three seconds before rising, bowing to the audience and leaving. *4'33"* isn't of course a silent composition at all. Although the pianist makes as little sound as possible, just the occasional turning over of the sheets of music, the audience's attention is inevitably upon the sounds both within and outside the auditorium. The audience learns to attend to those noises, which might include their own memories of noise, which are routinely taken for granted and given no real attention.

In this context it is worth noting that the late 20th-century English poet, Anthony Barnett, two of whose pieces of writing are in Part 3 (see pages 102–103), suggested in an interview in 1992 that 'what you play acts upon the silence, determines the nature, the sound of the silence which follows'. Talking about the trumpet player Leo Smith, he says 'Each sound phrase has its corresponding silent phrase'. Silence isn't of course poetry but it is the ground out of which poetry grows – and this thought is delicately caught by the New York poet, William Bronk, in 'Her Singing' (1956):

> As trees draw outward from the rooted ground
> from trunk to branch to twig to stem to leaves,
> her song was as she might have drawn upon
> the air a tree, and it stood still.

It is the music of the song which creates the sculpted stillness of the tree out of the insubstantial air.

As we make our way through the challenging worlds of contemporary poetry, it will be sensible to take the advice of Peter Riley, a poet and critic whose work has spanned the 1960s to the present moment. His early poem, 'Introitus', was written in the late 1960s but was only published by Shearsman in a volume of *Uncollected Writings* in 2007. It appears in full in Part 3 (see page 101). The title of the poem means 'an entrance' and refers to words sung by a choir in church as the priest approaches the altar. Riley's years living on the coast in Hastings had taught him about the difficulty of walking on shingle and about the care needed in order to make progress:

> To walk effectively on shingle you have to
> lean forwards so you'd fall if you didn't push
> your feet back from a firm step down and
> back sharp forcing the separate ground
> to consolidate underneath you, with a marked
> flip as you lift each foot, scattering
> stones behind, gaining momentum.

This act of walking is an interesting metaphor for the reading of poetry.

How this book is organised

Part 1: Approaching contemporary poetry

Part 1 is a survey of the background to contemporary poetry. It looks at the influence of T.S. Eliot, as well as Thomas Hardy, and charts the growth of modern ideas about poetry. There is also a section on poetry publishing, focusing particularly on the continuing growth of website publishing, and a brief overview of key political events since 1990 as a context for recent poetry.

Part 2: Approaching the texts

Part 2 considers different areas of contemporary poetry including sections on women's poetry, contemporary scenes of war, poetry in translation and Black poetry.

Part 3: Texts and extracts

Part 3 contains texts and extracts which illustrate the key themes found elsewhere in the book.

Part 4: Critical approaches

Part 4 examines some different ways in which critics have approached the subject of contemporary poetry.

Part 5: How to write about contemporary poetry

Part 5 offers a guideline of how to write about poetry and how to compare poems with each other.

Part 6: Resources

Part 6 contains guidance for further reading and a list of significant websites. There is also a glossary and index.

1 Approaching contemporary poetry

- What is so central about T.S. Eliot's influence on contemporary poetry?
- What is important about 20th-century American poetry in the development of poetry in Britain?
- Why were the 'poetry wars' of the 1970s important?
- What are the major differences between 'closed / fixed form' and 'open form' poetry?
- What impact has Internet publishing had on poetry readership?

In the beginning: T.S. Eliot and Dante

One of the great figures whose presence towers over the development of modern poetry in Britain is T.S. Eliot, whose poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, shocked and bewildered many contemporary readers. In a review for the *Manchester Guardian*, October 1923, Charles Powell suggested that the ordinary reader would make nothing of the poem: 'The thing is a mad medley.' But what he saw as a medley, an earlier reviewer for the *New York Tribune* had seen as 'the agonised outcry of a sensitive romanticist drowning in a sea of jazz'. In the *London Mercury* a reviewer complained that he had read Eliot's poem several times but was still unable to make head or tail of it, whilst an unsigned but sympathetic review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, November 1923, suggested that *The Waste Land* is a 'collection of flashes' which, like a **collage**, seem to be a 'complete expression of this poet's vision of modern life'. The reviewer went on to say:

> We have here range, depth, and beautiful expression. What more is necessary to a great poem? This vision is singularly complex and in all its labyrinths utterly sincere. It is the mystery of life that it shows two faces, and we know of no other modern poet who can more adequately and movingly reveal to us the inextricable tangle of the sordid and the beautiful that make up life.

T.S. Eliot was born and educated in America but spent most of his working life in England. His work is steeped in the European cultural tradition and *The Waste Land* is filled with references to French poetry, Shakespeare, Ovid, Arthurian legend and Wagner. A central influence on Eliot was the Italian poet Dante (1265–1321), whose long poem *Inferno* describes the poet's journey through the nine circles of Hell, guided by the spirit of the Latin poet Virgil.

Dante's vision of the enormous suffering of the damned, accompanied by their searing self-analysis, has had a major influence on modern poetry. This can be seen in Ciaran Carson's translation of Canto III (2002), where the enormous and frightening picture of lost souls, 'grey people', is seen in terms of

> outlandish tongues, and accents doloroso,
> howls, shrieks, grunts, gasps, bawls,
> a never-ending, terrible crescendo,
>
> rising to vast compulsory applause,
> revolving like sand or locusts in a storm,
> turning the air black as funereal gauze.

The lifelong importance of Dante to Eliot is evident in the text of a lecture he gave to the Italian Institute in July 1950, in which he acknowledged that the debt he owed to the Italian poet was of the kind 'which goes on accumulating, the kind which is not the debt of one period or another of one's life'. Eliot reminded his audience of his vision in *The Waste Land* of city clerks trooping over London Bridge from the railway station to their offices:

> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
> Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
> To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
> With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

Eliot was concerned that his readers should recognise precisely where he had obtained this image, from Canto III of *The Inferno*, and gave references in his notes 'in order to make the reader who recognised the allusion, know that I meant him to recognise it, and know that he would have missed the point if he did not recognise it'. Some twenty years after *The Waste Land,* Eliot attempted an equivalent to a Dante canto in *Four Quartets* – in 'Little Gidding' a hallucinatory meeting during a World War Two air-raid has the dramatic vividness of one of Dante's confrontations with the souls of the dead who are in Hell:

> In the uncertain hour before the morning
> Near the ending of interminable night
> At the recurrent end of the unending
> After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
> Had passed below the horizon of his homing
> While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin
> Over the asphalt where no other sound was

Between three districts whence the smoke arose
I met one walking, loitering and hurried
As if blown towards me like the metal leaves
Before the urban dawn wind unresisting.

In his 1950 lecture, Eliot commented upon the difficulty he had had writing this section of the poem:

> It was not simply that I was limited to the Dantesque type of imagery, simile and figure of speech. It was chiefly that in this very bare and austere style, in which every word has to be 'functional', the slightest vagueness or imprecision is immediately noticeable.

Concluding his talk to the Italian Institute, Eliot suggested that reading Dante became a constant reminder to any poet 'of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them'.

The importance of Dante to contemporary poets

The enduring importance of Dante's poetry is highlighted by the number of translations of *Inferno* which have appeared over the last twenty years. The most notable include those by Steve Ellis, the Irish poet Ciaran Carson, J.G. Nichols and Sean O'Brien. In addition, there have been two outstanding translations in America by Robert Pinsky and Michael Palma. Seamus Heaney's continued fascination with the dramatic immediacy of Dante's vision can be seen in 'Ugolino', the poem which closes *Field Work* and is also evident in 'The Crossing' (see Part 3, page 70), as well as in the imagery of circularity and danger which informs the title poem of his 2006 collection, *District and Circle* (see Part 3, page 72). In the latter poem, the siren-like call from the underground acts as an eerie opening to a poem that was written as a sequence of sonnets in the aftermath of the London bombings of July 2005:

Tunes from a tin whistle underground
Curled up a corridor I'd be walking down
To where I knew I was always going to find
My watcher on the tiles, cap by his side,
His fingers perked, his two eyes eyeing me
In an unaccusing look I'd not avoid,
Or not just yet, since both were out to see
For ourselves.

The opening lines of the second sonnet in Heaney's sequence conjure up the labyrinthine structures depicted by the 18th-century artist Piranesi. Piranesi's

Imaginary Prisons is a series of sixteen prints revealing enormous subterranean vaults and stairs:

> Posted, eyes front, along the dreamy ramparts
> Of escalators ascending and descending
> To a monotonous slight rocking in the works,
> We were moved along, upstanding.

Much of Heaney's poem revolves around feelings of guilt and retribution, images of which have become more haunting as the threat of terrorist attacks has grown during the first decade of the 21st century.

The American reaction: William Carlos Williams and R.F. Langley

Whilst Dante's influence continues to be one of the cornerstones of European culture, it is also worthwhile to consider the American reaction to T.S. Eliot's leanings towards the old European world. The contemporary poetry which appears in this volume has been influenced by both Eliot's tradition and that of the 20th-century American modernist poets. There was a clear sense to some poets that Eliot had turned his back on what was happening in his home country, the New World. One of the major 20th-century American poets, William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), claimed in his autobiographical work that *The Waste Land* had 'wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it':

> Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself – rooted in the locality which should give it fruit.
>
> (*Autobiography of a Poet*, 1951)

Williams registered his regret that a craftsman as fine as Eliot should turn his back on American poetry and lose contact with the 'locality', the 'western dialect', the American common scene and the sounds of colloquial American English. This is central to an understanding of one important strand of contemporary poetry: an awareness of the value of ordinary moments and the emotional importance of the everyday. For Williams, Eliot's treason was losing contact with the accomplishments of American technology and industry, as he saw it:

> American plumbing, American shoes, American bridges, indexing systems, locomotives, printing presses, city buildings, farm implements and a thousand other things that have become notable in the world.
>
> (*Contact*, Spring 1921)

It is no surprise that Williams's most-quoted phrase, from a short poem in 1927 and later used in near-heraldic fashion at the opening of his most ambitious work, *Paterson* (Book 1, 1946), should be:

> Say it! No ideas but in things.

Precise language

The importance of precision as a register of human emotion, a register of how our lives are defined in relation to a world of objects, can be seen in the poem 'The Tooth' by Robert Minhinnick (see Part 3, page 92). Minhinnick visited the Amariya bomb shelter in Iraq where four hundred people were burned to death during an American bombing raid in 1991:

> to pick the tooth
> Of a child like a rice grain
> From the ash.

It is the particularity, the small exactness of the object, which conveys the horror to us. It is the reference to vulnerability, 'the tooth / Of a child', which adds the turn of the screw and it is the reference to 'a rice grain' which raises for us the haunting spectre of world poverty and growing food shortages.

In contrast to Eliot's submersion in European cultural history, Williams concentrated upon the small individual moments which go to make up our perceptions. In 1923 he wrote the eight lines which could almost have been written in the last decade of the 20th century:

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens

Catherine Belsey suggests that this poem offers the clearly defined colours and shapes of things referred to; it seems to transmit the things themselves to our imagination. It is as though 'so much depends' upon their solid existence in a substantial world:

> And yet, if we look again, there is another way to read this short, simple text. The red and white in this poem are unqualified, and thus

> bright, shiny, 'glazed'. If this is a farmyard, it is one without shadows, or mud. Indeed, we might more readily 'see' a toy wheelbarrow, or a scene in a children's picture book. The poem seems to depict an innocence and purity not to be found on any real farm and, at least according to one possible interpretation, 'so much depends' on our ability to conceive of that lost but childlike world. Here the rhythms are simplicity itself, each short 'verse' repeating with minor variations the metrical pattern of the one before. On this reading, the red wheelbarrow of this poem issues from language, not from the world of things.
>
> (*Poststructuralism, A Very Short Introduction*, 2002)

In poetry, images present us with pictures in words and they allow us to see clearly what the poet has in mind. Often they seem to be chosen as representations of some 'truth' or 'meaning'. In this context it is worth bearing in mind the clear sense of an object *being there* in the red wheelbarrow poem. After all, does it have to *mean* something? Isn't it enough that we can simply *see* it?

R.F. Langley, school-teacher and poet (see 'Man Jack', Part 3, page 83), responded to an interview question about images. His interviewer commented that 'there seems little of what many poetry readers might think of as imagery in these poems. Would it be true to say that your poetry does not operate in this kind of way at all?' Langley replied:

> Well, if by imagery you mean a concern for the visual, I'd like to feel my poetry had it all the time. And I do also think that I am very aware of the metaphorical, metaphysical aspect…I would tend to prefer 'The Red Wheelbarrow' sort of imagery where there isn't that sort of metaphorical foisting. There's just an opening up to what is there in front. With things mattering about it.
>
> (*Angel Exhaust*, 1996)

Ruth Padel describes how she talked to a Greek van-driver whose vehicle had the sign 'METAPHORS' on its side. When she asked the man what he did he replied 'Taking something from one place to another,' which is of course what a metaphor does. Metaphors compare things, they say what one thing is like in terms of another. Padel refers to Aristotle's example of a metaphor: 'The ship ploughed the sea' in terms of how the word 'plough' transfers the associated meanings of agricultural work and growth to the sense of voyage over the ocean. She points out that when you say something is 'like' something else you are registering that it is not actually that thing: 'metaphor separates as well as joining its two things, two worlds'.