British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s

Politics and Art

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First published in Great Britain 1997 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and London
Companies and representatives throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-333-53280-5 hardcover
ISBN 0-333-53281-3 paperback

First published in the United States of America 1997 by
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,
Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 0-312-17250-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
British poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s : politics and art / edited by Gary Day and Brian Docherty.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-312-17250-8 (cloth)
1. English poetry—20th century—History and criticism.
2. Literature and society—Great Britain—History—20th century.
3. Politics and literature—Great Britain—History—20th century.
4. Criticism—Great Britain—History—20th century. 5. Influence (Literary, artistic, etc.) I. Day, Gary, 1956– . II. Docherty, Brian.
PR603.B75 1997
821'.91409—dc21 96-44311
CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

Acknowledgements

The editors and publishers wish to thank Anvil Press Poetry for permission to reproduce the extract from *Mean Time* by Carol Ann Duffy; Bloodaxe Books for permission to reproduce the extract from *Out of the Rain* by Glynn Maxwell; Carcanet Press for permission to reproduce extracts from *Edwin Morgan: Collected Poems;* Faber & Faber for permission to reproduce the extract from *The Dead Sea Poems* by Simon Armitage; Oxford University Press for permission to reproduce the extract from *Phrase Book* by Jo Shapcott.

We would also like to acknowledge Charmian Hearne for her help in guiding this book to publication and Deborah Day for preparing the index.

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Introduction:
Poetry, Politics and Tradition

Gary Day

The aim of this introduction is to place the following essays into a polemical context. My basic argument is that an exclusive concern with politics is threatening to impoverish our understanding of poetry. It has led to an ignorance of tradition and a corresponding blankness in the face of poetry as art. And, if criticism is so desensitised that it cannot recognise or respond to a poem as a poem, then what possible credence can be given to its political pronouncements? It is only by reconsidering what is meant by tradition that we can revitalise our sense of poetry which will, in turn, make us demand more of our politics than that it confuse posture with action or achievement.

There are two recognisable strands to twentieth-century British poetry. For John Powell Ward they are the 'English line' and Modernism.[1] The former runs from William Wordsworth to Philip Larkin and is characterised by 'verbal reserve and the pragmatic and laconic suspicion of the visionary or the extravagant'.[2] Ward argues that the dominant mood of this tradition is melancholy. It yearns for a lost past which it identifies with the natural world. The modernist tradition, by contrast, savours words for their own sake and prefers classical and mythological subjects to pastoral ones. It is less interested in nature than in 'how humans civilise nature with buildings, works of art...ideas and forms of law and institutions.'[3] Generally, where the 'English line' is diffident, pessimistic and reserved, the modernist one is robust, optimistic and outgoing.

Ward argues that the Movement[4] represents the last of the 'English line'. Mainly written in the 1950s, Movement poetry was a reaction to the innovations and formalistic concerns of modernism and the visions, mangled syntax and runaway rhetoric of 1940s verse. The first anthology of Movement poetry was Robert Con-

quest's *New Lines* (1956), and this was followed by A. Alvarez's *The New Poetry* (1962).[5] Its restricted subject matter, empirical character, disciplined construction and chaste diction represented a poetic timidity, inviting charges of philistinism and provincialism. It hardly seemed possible that such a myopic and exhausted poetry could adapt to the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. It therefore came as no surprise when Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in *Contemporary British Poetry* (1982)[6] claimed that their choice of poets signalled an imaginative freedom and linguistic daring wholly absent from Movement verse. Morrison and Motion also argued that the poets in their collection were aware of how language was implicated in politics, history and locality, giving it a significance beyond the circumscribed 'blokeishness' of Movement poets.

Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley distance themselves even further from the nostalgia and conservatism of the Movement in their anthology, *The New Poetry*.[7] Their title is a typical postmodernist tactic – a literal quotation from the past in order to re-evaluate and give it a new meaning in the present. *Their* new poetry, unlike that of the Movement, really is open, accessible and democratic. It casts off, the editors confidently announce, the negative inheritance of British poetry, 'its ironies, understatements and dissipated energies',[8] what Morrison calls the Movement's 'failure of nerve'.[9] Moreover, where Movement writers saw themselves as writing for a small, academic audience, the poets in *The New Poetry* 'reaffirm art's significance as public utterance.'[10] If Hulse and his fellow editors are to be believed, Movement poetry is dead indeed.

Eric Mottram, however, would disagree. His argument is that, even now, in the mid 1990s, it is only Movement type poetry which is anthologised and reviewed.[11] *Contemporary British Poetry* and *The New Poetry* do not so much abandon Movement poetics as develop them. Both, for example, are as wary of the romantic self as were Movement poets and, in their desire to restore value to the 'debased currency'[12] of language, they betray the influence of F.R. Leavis, the Movement's 'most important authority'.[13] Movement dominance, argues Mottram, has meant that other types of poetry, particularly that found in the small presses between 1960 and 1975, has not received the critical attention it deserves.

This body of poetry, continues Mottram, encouraged a wide readership by its emphasis on performance. It gave a voice to the

regions and was also open to influences from Europe and America. It continued the experiments of Dada and Surrealism as well as producing new forms such as 'concrete' and 'visual' poetry.[14] It also drew on popular music, particularly that of The Beatles and Bob Dylan, thereby expanding the lyric form 'beyond the confines of traditional logic and grammar usage'.[15] In sum, this poetry was experimental, risk-taking and performance orientated. However, as Norman Nicholson has observed of some of the other characteristics of this verse, '[d]irectness, spontaneity, informality, the lively image, the quick, arresting phrase, wit and humour, can all help to make a poem enjoyable and effective – but they don't make a poem in themselves.'[16]

This raises the awkward but unavoidable question of what we mean by a poem. But trying to answer that pales into insignificance when we consider what we mean by a 'good' poem. For Martin Booth, it is one which 'emotively uses words to express intelligent or emotional thought from one human being to another'.[17] while for A.E. Housman the test of a good poem was whether it lifted the hairs on the back of his neck. What I mean by a 'good' poem, and also by the related terms of 'art' and 'literature' will, I hope, become clearer in the course of this introduction.

One of the reasons why it is difficult to discuss what is meant by 'good' poetry is, ironically, poetry criticism itself. Its dominant idiom is political. Thus Robert Hampson and Peter Barry see the poetry of the 1960s and 1970s as constituting a 'pattern of resistance to the hegemonic culture'[18] while Morrison and Motion favour verse that is 'aware of economic and class differences' and so has something to say 'about the relationship between art and politics'.[19] Aesthetic considerations have been replaced by political ones to such an extent that Booth feels able to declare that the only true poetry is that which 'is understood by all', and which 'relat[es] directly to the mood of the masses'.[20] The test of good poetry is whether or not it is 'for the people'.[21]

The political character of poetry criticism means that the poetry of the present is always seen as progressive, that of the past as reactionary. Hence Mottram is able to dismiss the Movement for its 'woolly, reactionary rhetoric'.[22] This tendency is complemented by another: that of seeing the past as old and the present as new. The word 'new', for example, appears in two of the anthology titles while the term 'contemporary' occurs in the third. This emphasis on the 'new' partly reflects the influence of Foucault's view of

history as a series of discontinuities but it also bears the marks of the ideology of the new in consumer culture. Consumerism constantly reinvents itself through the 'new' understood as an improvement on the past. The past is thereby devalued, a process enhanced by the presentation of the 'new' as glitzy, glamorous and enticing.

Poetry criticism, then, seems to suffer from the imperatives of consumerism as well as from a desire to appear politically respectable. The effect of this has been to sever its connections with tradition. This is a fiercely contested term but, broadly speaking, tradition can be described as a way of organising poems from different periods so as to make them a force in the present without losing a sense of their pastness. The addition of new works to a tradition renews perception of its existing ones and the relations between them. Such an understanding of tradition helps to develop a sensitive and discriminating critical vocabulary that is far more alert to the values of difference than are some forms of political criticism which uncritically promote it as a virtue.

Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, for instance, link poetry to the politics of cultural identity arguing that those on the periphery have to define themselves against a repressive centre. This centre is identified with 'Standard English' which cannot render the experience of those on the margin. James Berry argues that it 'does not contain those idiosyncratic resources that allow particular textures of Caribbean experience to be expressed accurately.'[23] Hence Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'a major figure in Black British writing',[24] chooses to write in a non-standard dialect because that better captures 'the everyday bitterness of black suffering'.[25] The Scottish poet Tom Leonard also sets himself at an angle to the English language in order to recover a distinctive dialect and rhythm of speech. His work, according to Colin Nicholson, 'explores the gaps and fissures between the cultural claims and procedures of [English] and the everyday voices of Scotland.'[26]

The argument that writers should abandon 'Standard English' in favour of their own dialect is a powerful one. But its power comes from its simplicity. It assumes that one idiom is expressive while another is not. It forgets language must be made to yield its expressive capabilities. They are not spontaneously there. If they were, there would be no need for poetry. Poetry, as T.S. Eliot noted, is the 'intolerable wrestle with words', a 'raid on the inarticulate'.[27] It is an incessant guerrilla warfare conducted

against the blandishments of language whether it be at the centre or the periphery. All languages have to be worked to produce poetry but this elementary insight is suppressed if criticism operates with a binary view of expressive versus non-expressive languages. In short, political imperatives dull awareness of language as a material to be worked, thereby rendering us insensitive to its protean possibilities.

This is not to suggest that Creole or Gaelic may not contain greater expressive possibilities for a West Indian or a Scottish writer than for an English one. The idea that literature must speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and present, and the aspirations of its people, is a perfectly sound one. It was, for example, advanced by F.R. Leavis in respect of English literature, a thought which ought to give us pause before that heritage is completely dismantled by theory.

A poetic practice which cultivates its own idiom in opposition to all others not only deprives itself of the opportunity to subvert the dominant tongue, to do what Chinua Achebe called 'unheard of things with [English]'[28] it also raises the question of how different groups are to communicate with one another. Literature, after all, is a mirror in which we see the other as well as ourselves. By nature it is more likely to link identities than present them in splendid isolation. Literature aims to build a community, not Babel. It is a way of speaking to one another, in a peculiarly charged and formal manner, about the great issues of life: love, desire, passion, parenthood, ageing and death. That these are all class, culture and gender specific should not be regarded as a barrier to our understanding but as a means of enriching it. No one can avoid an existential encounter with one or more of these issues and literature is a resource that helps us live them. It does so by providing us with an ever increasing vocabulary that enables us to confront our common fate, and we forget that at our peril.

In confronting these issues literature is not so much expressing as exploring them. This requires a certain sincerity, a state that, as Umberto Eco has pointed out, is almost impossible to achieve in our postmodern culture. The 'game of irony'[29] is intrinsically involved in seriousness of purpose and theme. Indeed, as Linda Hutcheon observes, 'irony may be the only way we *can* be serious today.'[30] This, however, is just another aspect of the difficulty of language, the way it constantly pulls the writer towards what is already known and what has already been said. But that is the

creative writer's starting point. Sincerity is a precarious condition, hard to achieve and even harder to maintain. It consists of venturing beyond the horizon of predetermined meanings in the effort to articulate something uniquely personal. It is, furthermore, a seriousness that permeates conduct rather than an attitude to be displayed. The effort involved in trying to attain sincerity partly explains Cocteau's remark that if the poet has a dream, it is not to be famous but to be believed.

Similarly, I.A. Richards believed that the value of poetry lay in the difficult exercise of sincerity it demanded of readers even more than of poets. What he meant by that was that the reader should accept the challenge of literature to discover what his or her real beliefs and values are. Just as the writer has to resist the gravitational pull of language toward cliché and commonplace if he or she is to make it speak or even sing, so the reader has to stop sheltering behind a critical terminology that deadens each unique creation, stamping every work as the same. It is by pushing beyond conventional meanings and by being open to the challenge of literature that poetry, both for readers and writers, shows itself to be more concerned with exploration than expression.

Poetry explores issues by enacting them. Its peculiar alchemy is that it can turn words into the experience they describe. Poetry galvanises words giving them a charge and vitality they lack in ordinary usage. It rouse them from the sloth of habit to shine in use. In doing so, poetry foregrounds the intimate connection between words and experience, showing how the world is processed by language. Of course it is there in a brute sense, but it is only through the structuring operations of language that it becomes meaningful.

This tends to be forgotten in the commonsense view of things which states that, on the one hand, there is the world and, on the other, there is language and language describes the world. Poetry is an intense reminder that language, in fact, creates the world. It therefore has the potential to surprise us with something that we did not know or, as Dennis Potter remarked in his last televised interview, something that we did not know we knew. In this sense, poetry is more about epiphanies than issues.

As well as creating a new world, poetry also revives our sense of the existing one. It puts the dew back on things. It thickens what familiarity has thinned and makes palpable the unconsidered trifles of our lives. Its characteristic concern is with the concrete and

so it is scrupulous and precise in its evocation of the world, favouring sensuous particularity over abstract instance.

Poetry is about the power of language, politics about the language of power. This is not to say that either poetry or the criticism of poetry have no bearing on political understanding. For example, because poetry has a special care for the relation between words and the concrete it has the potential to offer a more focused view of the world than can be found in the speciousness that characterises much political debate. The role that literary criticism can play here has been well expressed by Ezra Pound:

> It has to do with the clarity and vigour of 'any and every' thought and opinion... When... the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive and bloated, the whole machinery of social and individual thought goes to pot. [Literary criticism] maintains the precision and clarity of thought, not merely for the benefit of a few dilettantes and 'lovers of literature' but maintains the health of thought outside literary circles and in non literary existence, in general and communal life.[31]

Poetry is on the side of what is individual, politics of what is general. Politics is interested in the individual only if it is an instance of the general, whereas poetry, unless it is in the speculative mode of a Wordsworth or an Eliot, is the advocate of '[a]ll things counter, original, spare [and] strange'.[32] Poetry makes time for things, it encourages a certain patience and quality of attention to what is particular. In so doing it offers some relief from the postmodern condition of being overwhelmed by information without the means to organise it. Poetry, it might be argued, becomes part of a politics of resistance by developing the power of concentration in a culture of distraction.

Political discourse has to be general since it seeks to address the largest possible audience in order to persuade it to a particular point of view. Its tone is therefore resolutely public. That of poetry is private, almost intimate. The reader has the sense of being singled out, of being taken into the poet's confidence to help determine whether what he or she presents is significant or not. And, accompanying this is an awareness that fundamental issues may be at stake, an awareness stimulated by the way poetry causes words to vibrate, echo and resonate.

Both in itself and in the demands it makes on the reader poetry displays a quality of sensibility that removes it from the characteristic forms of communication in consumer society. These are regulated by a regime of representations governing practically every aspect of human activity from the workplace to the bedroom: professional codes of conduct, administrative procedures, romance fiction, marriage guidance and sexual therapy. Nothing, it seems escapes being scrutinised and scripted in the public domain.

The fact that poetry also exists in this sphere – it is, after all, performed and published – does not mean that it functions as just another disciplinary discourse. Instead, it should be seen as a partial reformation of that sphere. Its whole endeavour is to engage the depth, complexity and music of language characteristics which, where they exist in the mass media, are subordinated either to selling or the promotion of conformity. Unlike the rigidities of headline culture, poetry aims to soften language to receive the impress of the personal which is otherwise lost in the opinion poll and market sample.

But the personal is public to the extent that shared experiences are expressed in a shared language. The uniquely individual element, however, adds a new dimension to both for while it assumes a community, it also seeks to extend what can be understood by that term. Here is another example of how poetry can be viewed as a form of resistance. It extends the range of language and experience whereas the institutions of mass culture, on the whole, limit them. More than that, poetry in its manner of loading and weighting words, its rootedness in tradition, its constellations of meaning and its forging of connections goes part way to answering the need for significance in human affairs, a need ignored by a society devoted to economic rather than human ends.

The political aspect of poetry's concern for the relation between words and the concrete is, then, fourfold. First it displays a sounder grasp of experience than does political rhetoric; second it helps to preserve what is individual from being subsumed under the general; third it develops a form of sustained attention in opposition to the endlessly proliferating jingles, slogans and soundbites of consumer culture; and fourth, poetry's attachment to the particular communicates a sense of 'felt significance', a sense that there is something more to life than materialism or a mere 'succession of days'. Looked at in this way, poetry can be seen as enrichment of

politics whereas the imposition of politics on poetry too often results in an impoverishment of the latter.

The concern for the relation between words and the concrete is one aspect of poetry's association with politics. Another comes from poetry being the creation of a world. Ideally, in the world of the poem, each part is fulfilled in relation to the whole and this acts as an analogy for utopian society. Furthermore, in contrast to the divisions and exclusions of class society and the atomisations of consumerism, poetry enacts the principles of unity, inclusion and relation. These are not merely formal considerations for, although it is an entity in its own right, the coordinates of a poem still correspond to those of the world. Hence the sense that our experience is impenetrable can be countered by the poet's imagining some equivalent of it that makes our own more manageable. This constitutes, as Seamus Heaney argues, the pressure of imagination pushing back against reality to reveal alternative orders and more promising potentials for growth.[33] In this respect, poetry illustrates I.A. Richards's remark that the arts are an appraisal of existence, an appraisal that is far more detailed and extensive than can be found in any political manifesto.

From a political point of view, poetry is neither a matter of saying the right – or left – thing nor a means of making it rhyme. Instead, it is an exploration of experience making its political effects difficult to calculate except with hindsight. Poetry can, of course, subtilise political awareness in the ways I have indicated but it is not my intention to bring poetry and politics into a closer alliance by showing that the relationship between them is more complex than some commentators imagine. My concern is not with poetry as applied art but with poetry as art.

To view poetry as art is not an easy undertaking. The arts in England have always been treated with suspicion and therefore critics have been anxious to justify them. Most commonly this has led to their being tied, as we have seen in the case of poetry, to a programme of political resistance. Certainly poetry can be the voice of protest, as a glance at the work of Blake, Shelley and the early Wordsworth will show. But poetry is also art and art cannot be justified in any readily demonstrable way because it is hard to say what art is.

The difficulty of the question, involving, as it does, the explosive issue of value judgements, has led to it being evaded. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of theory – by which I mean the