

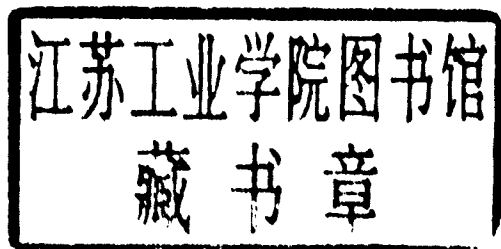
R.P. Draper

an introduction
to twentieth-century poetry
in english



An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English

R. P. Draper



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Preface

I would like to emphasise two aspects of this book which define what I hope will be its usefulness to the reader, and, simultaneously, perhaps excuse its scholarly limitations. Both of these aspects are alluded to in the title, and, indeed, explain its slightly top-heavy nature.

Firstly, this book, as it says, is an *introduction*; it is designed for the general reader, including the A-Level student and university undergraduate, who is interested in modern poetry, rather than the specialist (though I hope that the latter would not find it entirely without interest). The aim is to create a map which charts the increasingly crowded and complex territory loosely called 'modern poetry', singling out what seem to me its main features, developments and writers. In doing this I have not found it possible, or thought it desirable, to include every significant modern poet (though I hope I have not omitted any of the really major figures). I did not want the book to become a mere series of names with somewhat perfunctory notes attached, but to have space in which poets and particular poems could be discussed at sufficient length for their character and quality to be conveyed to the reader. At the same time I have tried to be objective in the sense that I have not included or excluded writers merely according to my own personal preference. I recognise that distortions are nevertheless bound to have occurred; but I hope that the map remains at least broadly true to the situation as it is on the ground. (The inclusion of some writers in the Bibliography whose work is not discussed in the main body of the book may also help to balance up the account.)

Secondly, it is presumptuous nowadays to use the phrase 'English Poetry', unless one is confining oneself arbitrarily to poetry written by poets born in England; and it is equally presumptuous to write 'Modern Poetry', unless one is willing, and able, to write a polyglot account of poetry in French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Hindu and all the other languages in which poetry has been, and still is being, written in the twentieth century. And for reasons which are sketched in Chapter 9 of this book, the 'English' of England, though still immensely fruitful and important, no longer has that pre-eminence in the production of English-language poetry

that it enjoyed till the end, or towards the end, of the nineteenth century. There are significant varieties of poetry written in English within the British Isles, and even more significant varieties in the USA and the Commonwealth. Moreover, the situation is complicated culturally and politically, as well as linguistically. Hence the cautiously treading phrase in my title 'Poetry in English'.

Over and above these considerations, I have also tried to write a commentary which gives some flavour of the critical and cultural debate in which such poetry flourishes, and to suggest what relations it has to past traditions and what 'traditions' it is in the process of establishing itself. I cannot hope to have succeeded in all of these purposes; and in many cases I have had to be content to refer the reader to other places where such matters are more fully and competently discussed. (To attempt a book of this kind is to have it brought home how much one depends on a whole host of critics and commentators; and I would like to acknowledge how much I am indebted, not only to those mentioned in the Notes and Bibliography, but to numerous others, whose names, alas, I may even have forgotten.) But I hope enough has been done to constitute a useful outline map; and to provide an introduction that will stimulate the reader to further exploration, above all of the poets and poems themselves.

R. P. DRAPER

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1

Introduction

'All coherence gone'

The twentieth century has been a century of enormous, and deeply disturbing, change. Yet it is the scale rather than the fact, or even the kind, of change that has been so remarkable. The English seventeenth century saw the beginnings of what we recognise as 'modern' in a change from the settled world-view and corporate sense of the Middle Ages to scepticism and individualism – a change reflected in the poetry of John Donne, who wrote:

'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation:
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phoenix, and that there can be
None of that kind, of which he is, but he.

These words can be matched with the celebrated lines in W. B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming':

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Both suggest a tragic sense precipitated by the undermining of values and beliefs hitherto accepted as universally valid and permanent. But if the changing of the old order in the seventeenth century led to regicide and ultimately the rise of parliamentary democracy, for the ordinary common man life went on much the same as before. The disintegration proclaimed in Yeats's lines may be intellectually

similar, but the consequences were already being felt far more widely, and on a much vaster scale, than anything known to Donne or his early seventeenth-century contemporaries.

'The Second Coming' was written in January 1919, less than three months after the end of what used to be called The Great War, but is now more usually referred to as World War I. This was war on an unprecedentedly international scale, involving not only all the European powers, but major world powers such as America and Japan. It was also a war of the common man, in which not only professional soldiers, but volunteers and conscripts from every walk of life were caught up, and in which the number of casualties was obscenely huge. 'The blood-dimmed tide' did, indeed, seem to have been 'loosed', creating something that was almost a literal rather than metaphorical condition in the trench warfare fought between the Germans and the Allies in northern France. The sense of disintegration was likewise made physically real in the dismembered bodies which littered the battlefields; and it had its social and spiritual equivalent in the sense of betrayal felt by many soldiers who had trusted the leadership of the 'powers that be' only to find themselves the victims of what seemed an incompetent High Command. Still more significantly, it was a mechanised conflict in which artillery, machine-guns, tanks and, for the first time (though not to be compared with developments in World War II), aerial warfare acquired supreme importance. Although hand-to-hand fighting and countless acts of individual bravery still played a decisive part, the experience of many soldiers was of passive submission to a death-dealing machine. At the Battle of the Somme, July 1916, when 20,000 men were killed on the first day, few of the attacking British troops ever came to grips with the enemy. They were simply mown down by the German machine-guns (which, ironically, were supposed to have been wiped out by the intensity of the preceding British bombardment). The traditional heroism of the individual soldier, as an eyewitness account graphically illustrates, went down before the impersonality of the machine:

I saw from my post the first wave of troops scrambling out of their trenches in the early morning sunlight. I saw them advancing rapidly led by an officer. The officer reached a hillock holding his sword on high. Flashing it in the sunlight, he waved and sagged to the ground. His men, undaunted, swept up the mound to be mown down on reaching the skyline, like autumn corn before the cutter.¹

The effect of this and similar experiences on the soldiers of The Great War is seen in the poetry of Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen. In the latter's 'Soldier's Dream' release from the fearful technology of war is what the soldier longs for. In his dream 'kind Jesus' deliberately jammed the guns and rusted the bayonets on both sides, 'ours' and 'Theirs', but God, who was 'vexed', gave power to the militant Archangel Michael: 'And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.'

Such sardonic disillusion is characteristic. The satire implies a split in the once harmonious assumptions of a Christianity in which God the Father and God the Son were at one; now they are deeply divided, and 'God' has become no more than an apostatisation of the authorities who set, and keep, in motion an inhuman mechanism of destruction. In the minds of many writers the war became symbolic of a corrosive force which ate away the conventions and beliefs shoring up established society – a watershed dividing, as Philip Larkin's 'MCMXIV' suggests, innocence from experience.

That, of course, is a simplification. Larkin's poem paints a world of decent, almost pastoral, serenity changing after 1914 to something all the more appalling to the imagination for being expressed only in terms of what ceased to be rather than the horrors that were to come. The facts are more complex. The Great War was itself the outcome of a competitive struggle between the older industrial power of Britain and France and the growing industrial strength of Germany; and, as was to be even more apparent in World War II, the still newer industrial might of the United States of America had to be called in to the aid of the old before victory could be secured for the Allies. In Britain, in particular, a euphoric, and often deeply sincere, belief in empire-building (as a moral mission bringing the benefits of western civilisation to supposedly less enlightened peoples) masked a real decline in the economic pre-eminence which the nation had enjoyed as a result of its late eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution. Moreover, the tensions and strains associated with industry and empire were already evident in the nineteenth century in, for example, the economic and agricultural depressions of 1873–96, the wars against the South African Boers (1881 and 1899–1902) and the running sore of Irish Home Rule which came to a head in the Dublin Easter Rising of April 1916. (This was patched up after World War I by the treaty of 6 December 1921 establishing the Irish Free State, but on the basis of partition, which left serious problems that are still unsolved today.)

Conditions of poverty and overcrowding among the increasingly urbanised working class, exacerbated by periods of severe unemployment, led to the development of trade unionism and strikes such as those of the gasworkers in 1888 and the dockers in 1889. These in turn fostered the growth of working-class political movements which reached their most significant stage in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee (1900), which became the Labour Party in 1906, and eventually, in the post-war period, supplanted the Liberal Party as the main opposition to the Conservatives. From the points of view of the upper and middle classes these were disturbing signs of the old order changing, giving place to a new one in which their wealth and privileges seemed to be under threat – though it was often from individuals within these classes (such as the ‘Fabians’, Sidney and Beatrice Webb) that the intellectual and political leadership came in the struggle to improve social conditions and extend the parliamentary franchise. The Reform Acts of 1884–5 gave some working men the vote, but it was not till 1918 that both men and women were enfranchised (and full enfranchisement for 21-year-old women did not come till 1928). Women in Britain, following the lead already given by American women, had begun campaigning for independent rights prior to the war, upsetting entrenched conventionality with their militancy, and although they agreed to put their grievances in abeyance for the duration of World War I, by virtue of the work they did replacing men at the front they effectively undermined the male prejudices which decreed that they were by nature unfitted for tasks outside the home. What is now thought of as ‘women’s liberation’ did not come until well after World War II, but it was in the first part of the twentieth century that consciousness, reinforced by practice as well as argument, of women’s equality with men firmly established itself in the social and political spheres.

POST-WAR AND MODERNIST

After World War I Britain and the West saw further changes which continued the impetus of these pre-war developments and their acceleration by the war itself. Despite setbacks such as the Great Depression, which affected America and the whole of the English-speaking world in 1929–34 and brought with it mass unemployment, the standard of living for ordinary working people greatly

improved compared with that in the nineteenth century. Yet the erosion of its imperial role left Britain as a medium power rather than a world power, uncertain whether the future lay with its 'special relationship' with America or as a member of the European Union, and its affluence declined *relative* to that of other Western countries. The USA, in particular, became the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world, though serious deprivation, especially (but not exclusively) among Native Americans and Americans of African origin, existed side by side with this prosperity, aggravating tensions created by racial discrimination. National self-confidence was high, however, among the bulk of the US population and increased after the World War II victories over Germany and Japan, surviving even the disillusionment with 'peace' created by the division of spheres of influence between the Soviet Union and the West, and the 'cold war' between capitalist and socialist economic systems which this generated. Sharp anxiety was felt about the destructive potentialities of nuclear weapons, on which the uneasy balance between the two great powers depended, but it was not until the Vietnam War, in which the USA experienced its first major military defeat, that American self-confidence was seriously dented. With the collapse of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s the USA was left as the only effective super-power – its problems more acute internally than externally.

America's problems are those of adjustment to the enormously increased control over man's physical environment which 'progress' (meaning largely technological-cum-commercial development) has made possible in the twentieth century. The advent of such things as the telephone, motor car, aeroplane, cinema, wireless, television and computerisation have speeded up communications and created a national and international awareness which, along with ever-increasing industrialisation and commercial activity, have radically altered people's sense of the universe in which they live. The traditional relation between the human and the natural has been effectively reversed. As Fredric Jameson suggests, in an argument about James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the city-based modernism which it represents:

What is paradoxical about the historical experience of modernism is that it designates very precisely that period in which Nature – or the in- or anti-human – is everywhere in the process of being displaced or destroyed, expunged, eliminated, by the

achievements of human praxis and human production. The great modernist literature – from Baudelaire and Flaubert to ‘Ulysses’ and beyond – is a city literature: its object is therefore the anti-natural, the humanised, par excellence, a landscape which is everywhere the result of human labour, in which everything – including the formerly natural, grass, trees, our own bodies – is finally produced by human beings.²

This speeding up of change till it reaches a critical mass threatening irreversible consequences is what lies, for example, behind T. S. Eliot’s inverted vision of a ‘waste land’ of city-dwellers herded into unnaturally close proximity, but deprived of the rituals and conventions of smaller, more organic, and more slowly evolving societies. A neo-pastoralism develops which, in the work of writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes, also becomes a critique of the evils of a deracinated society. (It is significant that Lawrence, though an English writer, had his closest affinities with certain American writers, saw America as the symbolic nation of modernity, and found his most receptive audience in America.)

Perhaps more importantly, however, consciousness of ‘the achievements of human praxis and human production’, whether regarded as a good or an evil, generates what might be called the ‘arbitrariness’ of much twentieth-century poetry – its consciousness of itself, not as an extension of natural processes (the ‘art that nature makes’ of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*), but as another artefact in a world of essentially man-made productions. Here it is closely allied to developments in modern critical theory derived from the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure which emphasise the arbitrariness of the verbal ‘signifier’, its lack of inherent connection with the thing ‘signified’, and the pattern of contemporary relationships between words as they are used at any one given time rather than their historic derivation from earlier forms. The principle of relativity becomes all-important: ‘both signifier and signified are purely relational or differential entities. Because they are arbitrary they are relational.’³

The relativistic view tends also towards the sceptical and demystifying. Language, and the literature composed from it, is seen as an elaborate, internally organised construction properly subject to intellectual analysis, but deprived of its quasi-religious status. One of the consequences of this view is ‘the death of the Author’. Hitherto the individual writer, whose work is enshrined in the accepted canon of great literature, has been accorded high status for

his almost superhuman skill in the creation of deeply meaningful texts to which he himself holds the essential clues. But in the approach exemplified by the French philosopher/critic Roland Barthes, this traditional respect has been devalued, and with it the common assumption of the writer as someone in complete control of what he writes. The very idea of authorship is seen as over-restrictive: 'To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.'⁴ And in tandem with this downgrading of the Author there is a corresponding upgrading of the Reader – or rather Readers – whose multiple and subjectively various interpretations of texts are welcomed as democratically equal and open-ended.

Such a line of argument leads to affirmation of the man-made rather than the confirmation of a natural or divinely sanctioned authority, as is evident in Barthes's conclusion that the process is one that 'liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law'.⁵ It is an argument appropriate to the complexity and uncertainty typical of a world where it can no longer be taken for granted that the universe is the creation of a purposeful and beneficent creator, and where almost all the traditional icons of authority seem to have been knocked from their pedestals. Yet the anxiety for reassurance manifestly persists. Much literary 'modernism' is, in fact, highly conservative, reflecting this deep, underlying anxiety and the desire for orderly structures, or the re-vitalising of decadent ones, to counteract it. But it also coexists with more liberal manifestations which seek to run with the tide of uncertainty, welcoming the breakdown of hierarchies and the deconstructing of ideologies as a benign chaos. These, broadly speaking, are the two camps, led by Eliot/Pound and Williams/Stevens respectively, which are discussed in Chapter 2 of this book. Paradoxically, however, the two camps are united in their search for changes in form and language which will more properly articulate the nature of the world as the twentieth century perceives it; and, equally paradoxically, in an increasingly democratic society they produce poetry which expresses the values of a sophisticated élite, and which in its deliberate 'difficulty' often seems aloof from, and even hostile to, popular culture.

The alternative tradition discussed in Chapter 3 produces poetry that is more accessible. But it would be a mistake to treat it – as earlier critics, carried away by the heady excitement generated by

modernism, tended to do – as merely the perpetuation of Victorian forms and values unmodified into a poetic world which had moved on. Many of the writers within this alternative tradition were more radically subversive than their apparent conformity suggests, and their poetic techniques were often far from conventional. The most marked difference between them and the modernists is in their respect for the kinds of rhetoric, versification and syntactical completeness by which the thrust of discursive argument is maintained. In the work of these poets the disruptive forces of change into which modernists variously flung themselves with willed enthusiasm, or felt themselves being thrust reluctantly, were neither ignored nor underestimated, but harnessed to structures suggesting continuity with the past. If content did not pressure form into fragmentariness or openness, neither did form remain untouched by the potentially chaotic material it tried to contain. Often the tension between the two was poignant and in itself deeply expressive. Hardy, in particular, ‘though certainly not an ideological modernist, is emphatically a self-aware modern; and despite the obvious differences between his work, situated as it is in a national tradition, and that of the more internationally minded modernists with their accent on a paradoxically anti-traditional tradition, there are features both of form and content which make that work recognisably modern.’⁶

It can be argued that modernism as such was a dead-end, that mid- and late twentieth-century poetry, as exemplified in the work of Auden, Lowell, Larkin and Heaney, has more in common with the non-modernist modernity represented by Hardy and Yeats. But this is perhaps to take an English rather than an American view. On the western side of the Atlantic the continuing vitality of the Pound/Williams undermining of rational discourse to make way for more fluid kinds of imaginative relationship is more evident than it is on the eastern side; and it is given new emphasis by a genre of women’s poetry which not only serves as the literary arm of feminism, but extends the range of language – and more specifically of perception as mediated through language – to include revolutionary ideas of gender. American women poets rather more than those from Britain and the Commonwealth use the formal licence encouraged by modernism to register a break with predominantly masculine criteria and assumptions. As with other continuers of the modernist tradition, however, this does not necessarily entail reproducing all the classically modernist characteristics. In general, women employ only those features which enable them to develop

styles appropriate to their distinctively woman's experience and vision. And what tends to be more important in determining the character of particular women poets' work is their degree of commitment to specifically feminist causes as compared with the expression of more broadly feminine themes (which often have their counterparts in men's work, too).

Something similar might be said with regard to the homosexual and lesbian strains in post-modern poetry. New kinds of awareness of the self and the loosening of traditional patterns of relationship demand new modes of writing. For example, the curiously drifting syntax and unexpected confusion of persons and voices in the work of John Ashbery are explained by the poet himself in terms of his sense of a fluidity rather than fixity of personal identity: 'I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry.'⁷ Some of the changes in the later work of Adrienne Rich can likewise be seen as the product of a new, and distinctively female, sense of being.

EROSION OF THE CENTRE

The re-shaping of poetry to express a new conception of identity, or with the purpose of trying to create that identity, accounts for another, increasingly important area within that vast range which constitutes twentieth-century poetry in English. This is the poetry of English-speaking – or perhaps one should say 'Anglophone' – writers who are embraced (sometimes reluctantly) within the United Kingdom, and of former members of the British Empire such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and parts of the Caribbean. Strictly speaking, the USA should also be reckoned within this category, but the status of 'American' has long since become equal to, or even more important than, 'English' so that the same sense of a need to assert cultural along with political independence does not apply to its twentieth-century literature. Commonwealth countries, on the other hand, have more recent, as well as more ambivalent, linguistic problems; while Scottish, Irish and Welsh non-Gaelic literature presents problems which are different again. And just as significant are the regional diversities within 'English' English.

Deep and far-reaching aspects of change are evidenced, then, in all the varied manifestations of modern English poetry. 'The centre