

Auguries of Evocation

British Poetry During and After the Movement

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Foreword

NO exclusive critical examination of the poetic manifestoes of Davie, Amis, Wain, Conquest, Hughes, Larkin, Tomlinson and Gunn, together, exists in books on British poetry after 1950 as presented here. Blake Morrison's book is more a study of poetic relationships of Movement poets, their general beliefs and tradition; Michael Schmidt and Peter Jones's book on British poetry after 1950 is a critical anthology; Calvin Bedient's book offers brief, though penetrating, comments on post-War British poets whom he finds "difficult, 'American' in the way it approaches its subjects cold, indeed in a cold sweat, without help, alone in an undefined silence." This book, for the first time, examines statements on poetic theory, made by poets above from time to time.

The first two chapters form a dialectic in themselves arguing and counter-arguing upon the nature of poetry and its relation to people. The first chapter is concerned with Movement poetics whose aim was to bring simpler parts of melody and rhythm back to proper orchestration. It considers in detail Robert Conquest's anthology on British poetry of the fifties, *New Lines*, I & II, and D. J. Enright's *Poetry of the 1950's*. Chapter II is a study of the reaction that followed Movement aims and ideology, made manifest first in Alvarez's anthology, *The New Poetry* (Penguin, 1962). It also examines Davie and Alvarez's claim for a new seriousness and new aestheticism as criteria for new poetry.

The remaining three chapters on Hughes, Gunn, and Tomlinson both apply and illustrate the poetic theory and practice of poets under discussion. The poets' choice is my own as is the choice of their poetic collections analysed (heavily limited for want of space). In spite of at least five books on Hughes's poetry by Hirschberg, Gifford and Roberts, Keith Sagar, and Ekbert Faas, Crow myth as well as the source of certain other images and symbols remains unlocated. My chapter on Hughes locates them considering in detail

Hughes's religious position which has also not been specifically dealt with by available scholarship.

An analysis of Thom Gunn's *Moly* is done in Chapter IV. *Moly* has received some unfavourable reviews, and has not been extensively analysed. Charles Tomlinson's *Seeing is Believing* and *Renga* form two masterpieces in themselves, and their close analysis has long been due. Instead of going through the whole range of poetic collections of poets studied and offering comments in a generalised or journalistic manner, I have concentrated on a close textual analysis of collections I consider important of the entire written work a poet has done. Moreover, what is seldom realized, and even not realized at all, is the fact that apart from Ted Hughes, Gunn and Tomlinson have also been making subtle uses of myth either in individual poems or in their poetic frameworks. *Moly* and *Renga* will illustrate the point. This tradition extends to Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*.

Since the work of art is at the centre of my critical discussion, I have, time and again, made poets' statements as meaningful referents for the illumination of intentions and concepts, images and symbols, which, otherwise, would have remained in the dark. I have taken poet to be an empirical particular whose relationships with objects refer, represent, signify and symbolize levels of adjustments, degrees of involvement and communication. This empirical particular I also take to be a text, who, though always being dragged, sometimes to the hazards (as in Hughes) and sometimes to the deep and meaningful silence (as in Tomlinson), is always building bridges of conscious adjustment and patterns of control over its medium (as in Gunn). The poet and the poem I view as married partners whose spirits demand liberation without walls of flesh, but whose walls of flesh again invite them to copulate and multiply relationships. The struggle is my theme throughout.

A belief in noumenon, the "other," has been consistently occupying the poetry of poets studied, and the Muse, who had been imprisoned in the fifties within the confines of an empirical and earthly city, is finally released in the open spaces of mystery bodies over our existences. The Conclusion gathers important

findings and places Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's anthology on British poetry (1982) in perspective.

To Edward T. Larrissy of the Department of English, Warwick University, I am grateful for reading my chapters, correcting and commenting upon them; to Professor C.J. Rawson of Department of English, Warwick University, I have incurred debts words cannot tell; his love and encouragement it is difficult for me to parallel. To Peter Larkin and Audrey Cooper I owe thanks for readily helping me with the books I needed; to the staff at the inter-library loan I express my deep gratitude; their promptness in getting for me necessary books has been exemplary. The study would still not have been possible had British Council not awarded me scholarship from India to study at Warwick University for one year. I sincerely thank British Council for the financial help.

Varanasi

C.S.S.

**For my mother
Who gave me bread
And my father
Who gave me water**

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CHAPTER I

Urban Muse in Empirical Locale

THE chapter will consider Robert Conquest, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie and John Wain's statements on poetic theory and try to discover principles of poetic composition which became conspicuous and characteristic of a group of writers generally known as having given birth to the Movement. The first part will establish the context by examining the nature and implication of relationship among poets under consideration; the second part will put up the case by prominently focussing attention on the poetic manifestoes of each of these poets, while the third part, *i.e.*, the Conclusion, will gather important findings and attempt a comparative evaluation. It will also make such necessary generalisations as are warranted. The main burden of the chapter, however, will be to see above poets, acting and reacting, within the framework, conscious and unconscious both, of a certain specific climate of literary norm, with regard to style, diction, syntax, tone, subject-matter, and, in fact, the attitude to poetic composition as a whole. The chapter will try to arrive at a Movement consensus, ethic, or code, if one would wish to call it.

I

Answering a question from Clive James concerning his first contact with Robert Conquest, Amis said: "I had a poem in *New Poems* 1951. I had only a toehold in the London literary world and would come from Swansea to London just for a party for the publication of that book. I came down and met Bob. He told me fifty limericks and the whole of his sequel to *Eskimo Nell*, which is better than his original. I had to be put on train afterwards. After that, I was in *New Lines*, the idea for which was all Bob's."¹ Amis had applied for a scholarship to St. Catherine's College, Cambridge, which he failed to obtain. He won, however, a place at St. John's, "one of the less preten-

tious Oxford Colleges.” At St. John’s, Amis met Philip Larkin, who was already there, for the first time. Larkin recognised in Amis “the presence of a talent greater than my own.”² As a consequence of this friendship Amis dedicated *Lucky Jim* to Larkin. Recalling his experiences about the first idea of *Lucky Jim*, Amis told Melvyn Bragg: “When *Lucky Jim* was conceived . . . I went up to what was then the university college of Leicester, to see my old friend Philip Larkin, who was working in the university library there. He said: ‘one for a cup of coffee in the Common Room,’ and after about ten minutes, I said to myself: ‘You know, my God, somebody should do something about this, because this is totally uncharted territory’.”³

Larkin later said: “*Lucky Jim* was published in 1954—but of course we’d been exchanging letters and showing each other our work for a long time, and I think we laughed, at the same things and agreed largely about what you could and couldn’t write about, and so on.”⁴ Furthermore, at St. John’s, Larkin and Amis were under the same tutor, Gavin Bone. An important moment came when John Wain joined the company of Larkin and Amis in 1943. Wain recalls that Larkin was finishing his undergraduate course that spring and in the summer went to take up a job in Wellington, Shropshire. Wain humbly recalls that acquaintance with Larkin has been of “greatest importance”⁵ to him. “Had it not been for the accident that I occasionally saw him reading the newspapers in the common room, I should not have known of his existence. And he knew of mine, if at all, only slightly. We became friends later.”⁶ Larkin was fairly respected among his friends and often drew the motley crew which shouted “Philip’s coming up.” In this crew was Amis whom Wain met some time in 1944. Amis had a copy of Larkin’s *Jill* which he sold to Wain. Amis himself was writing a novel at this time and Wain recalls that he would never have written *Hurry On Down* if he had not read Amis’s novel which was never published. Wain even founded the literary magazine *Mandrake* in 1945 in which Larkin, Amis, Jennings and Wain published their poems which later came to characterise some of the qualities of the Movement poets. Outside the Oxford trio of Larkin-Amis-Wain, the other important literary friendship which developed was between D.J. Enright and Robert Conquest. Both had been contributing their poems

to the *Listener* and the *New Statesman*, and Enright particularly liked Conquest's "Reflections on Landscapes" describing it as "cold, intelligent and self-contained."⁷

Donald Davie, the last, and perhaps now the most important, of these poets, was at Cambridge when most of the Movement activities were taking place at Oxford. In 1974, in the famous article "The Varsity Match," Davie wrote: "Ten or twelve or perhaps fifteen years before, those same Oxford pubs where Fuller and Hamilton drank Worthington, had seen John Wain and Kingsley Amis, with presumably one or two others (Wallace Robson? Arthur Boyars? sometimes Philip Larkin?), preparing for the assault that, by way of Wain's radio programme *New Soundings*, established itself as "the Movement," recorded in Robert Conquest's anthology *New Lines* and George Hartley's magazine *Listen*. Ten or so years before that the plotters in the pubs were Wystan Auden and Stephen Spender; and ten or so years after John Fuller and Ian Hamilton they were, I suppose, Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop and Gareth Reeves."⁸ Although Davie seems to have been aware of the activities of other poets under consideration, there is little possibility of his having met them in the fifties. Davie, nevertheless, had been anticipated by his unknown Oxonian colleagues, for recalling his attitude to poetry then, Davie wrote: "... the first of my all too many manifestoes about poetry, printed in those years mostly in Cambridge magazine, characteristically genuflected towards the author of *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*; and staked out whatever position they timidly sought to maintain, by veering a very few points away from something that Eliot had said in print."⁹

Of his first acquaintance with Amis, Davie recalls in his autobiography: "It was I suppose one day in 1960 or 1961 that, about one o'clock, the phone rang in the turreted polygonal room in Caius which I had taken over from Charles Brink. I was just finishing a supervision, and got rid of my pupils in a hurry when the voice on the phone identified itself as Kingsley Amis, in Cambridge for the day and asking me to lunch with him. Kingsley Amis was one of several people I had hurried to get acquainted with, some years before, when our names had been linked together by commentators in a literary manifestation of the 1950s which got itself called The Movement—itself I

believe, an important phenomenon for historians of English society and culture, since it represented the first concerted though unplanned invasion of the literary Establishment by the scholarship boys of the petty bourgeoisie."¹⁰

Amis, in that year, had moved from Swansea to Cambridge and soon was under attack from F.R. Leavis, who resented Amis's appointment and described him "a pornographer." Davie and Holloway, however, came to Amis's rescue in a Faculty Meeting. Later also, for once "... he (Amis) came to a Caius dinner as Joseph Needham's guest, when my guest was his and my friend Robert Conquest."¹¹ We might well sum up one aspect of these relationships by having recourse to Davie's statement: "I'm like Wain and Larkin and the others in not being product of the provinces known to the tourist, but of Industrial Midlands, in my case the South Yorkshire eyefield; and like nearly everyone in the group I'm a product of the lower middle class, that is, of a stratum of British society in which the life of the mind is not taken for granted as taking part of everyone's time, but rather where if it is honour'd at all, has to be struggled for, and therefore embraced with more tenacity, fervour. . . . Accordingly, my history is the history of my education and duplicates that of all the rest—a winning of-way to one of the ancient universities by competitive examination, rather than going there as a matter of course in the case of products of more privileged classes, such as Spender, Auden, Lehmann, Connolly, and almost every other writer of previous generations that you can think of."¹²

One of the most curious things about the Movement has been the denial of its existence by those who gave it birth. In an essay Davie wrote in summer 1959, he recalls how the Movement poets ridiculed and deprecated its very idea, as, on the other hand, they kept it going. Davie even acknowledges that Movement poets went much further than halfway to meet the reader and whenever "we were challenged or flattered or simply interviewed", we pretended that "the Movement didn't exist, that it was an invention of journalists, that we had never noticed how Larkin and Gunn and Amis had something in common, or that, if we had noticed, it didn't interest or excite us."¹³

It can be easily perceived that after the Movement Davie has done more to rehabilitate and give it a shape and a texture. Clearly, something which doesn't exist cannot be created. How it is that the journalists created the Movement? Amis's view is more balanced and gives us the right perspective: "We weren't consciously a group. One doesn't start work that way: perish the thought. A style emerges a lot more gradually and a lot less wilfully than that. . . . The idea that you plan, let alone plot with others, is absurd."¹⁴ Even here Amis is not putting the thing as it really came out later. When Enright and Conquest brought out their anthologies, Conquest made a modest statement that "these poets do not have as much in common as they would if they were a group of doctrine-saddled writers forming a definite school complete with programmes and rules. What they do have in common is perhaps, at its lowest, little more than a negative determination to avoid bad principles."¹⁵ However, the trouble with all these statements is that those who create history do not know what they have done, and if they knew it, perhaps the history would lose the intensity and force of the character of its events and the task of the literary historian would be over. Anthony Thwaite quite rightly thinks that "the nine poets in these anthologies . . . were as firmly saddled with a common label as any doctrine could have possibly achieved."¹⁶ Wain also holds that these poets "were united more by their dislikes than their likes", but goes on to add, "But a broad similarity emerged, and began to be seen in their work. For a brief moment, there was a 'Movement' and it *did* cohere."¹⁷

"Poetry is the sound of human speech at those times when it comes closest to the speech of the angels and the speech of the animals,"¹⁸ wrote Wain. Glancing backward a little we discover that Auden-Spender-Day Lewis in the thirties propounded a poetics of the writer's concern with social reality and emphasized objective and impersonal approach. However, the objective became subjective at some crucial point either in the life of the poet or the social environment. Moreover, poets of the younger generation (Dylan Thomas and George Barker among others), were not happy at the "mental gymnastics" which the poets of the Eliot generation propagated both in poetry and in criticism.¹⁹ It amounted to the suppression, or at least the inhibited use, of

language and subject matter.²⁰ Ian Hamilton goes to the extent of saying that the "... notorious forties, has been thoroughly written off in most contemporary pigeon-holings. It has popularly become the decade dominated by the punch-drunk Apocalypse, the foaming horsemen..." and goes on to quote John Wain on his diagnosis of the forties: "If we find much of it impossibly overblown, exaggerated, strained, rhetorical, all we have to do is to remember it was produced under impossible conditions."²¹

Dylan Thomas's statement in 1934 that "the more subjective a poem, the clearer the narrative line," sounded the first note of demarcation between the poetry of the thirties from that of the forties.²² It became impossible for the poet of the forties to maintain the tradition of the objective approach or shape-fulness and intelligence in the general chaos and confusion of contradictory theories and principles. Poetry does not exclusively grow out of social reality much less out of any theories about it. It grows from within one's own self, and once the self or the social reality is disturbed, communication with the reader becomes a lie and poets sit on the high pedestal of flamboyant rhetoric and inflated vision to balance the dry salvages of the leavenings of history. G.S. Fraser remarked: "The obscurity of our poetry, its air of something desperately snatched from dream or woven round a chime of words, are the results of disintegration, not in ourselves, but in society."²³

The work done by Tambimuttu during this period is remarkable. In the second issue of *Poetry London* (April 1939) he wrote: "This paper exists as a platform for poets who require more freedom than that afforded them in the papers of little hencoops and cliques, in order to work well. It is a protest against the modern suppression of free speech in verse... we will give the public what they want..." In this climate of change (Eliot, Auden, Spender witnessed all)²⁴ the poetics of concrete and hard imagery, rhetorical discipline, intellectual order and impersonalist ethic became a silent witness to the poetry of self-expression which labelled it as outdated, over-stretched, and even irrelevant to the purpose. These poets, who called themselves Apocalypse poets, said that they stood for "greater freedom, economic no less than aesthetic, from machines and mechanistic thinking." Other important poets of

this period, Henry Treece, G.S. Fraser and J.F. Hendry claimed: "No existent political system, Left or Right, no artistic ideology, surrealism or the political school of Auden, was able to provide this freedom." Concepts like "A good poem is a response to a human situation and not an exercise in linguistic technique,"²⁵ "What our man, or woman, required is what fits verse for rendering in those ways: absolute clarity, heavy rhythms and noticeable rhymes with some break in the lines preferred at the end of the line. Subject-matter must suit the occasion by being public, popular, what unites the individual with some large group of his neighbours,"²⁶ "It was, I believe, in response to this situation that 'modern' poetry, and the 'modern' arts generally, grew up . . ."²⁷ became recurring features of poets who disliked the tradition of classical objectivity, continued so relentlessly by Richards, Leavis and Empson, after Pound and Eliot. Their views on poetry were replaced by a poetics of subjectivism which found the contours of limited social framework sufficient guide to, and material for, the work of art. Such an art was soon to become the coterie of poets and not of the reader, for the latter was consistently baffled by the poet's occasional use of personal myth, metaphor, symbol and idiom.²⁸

When we come to the fifties, the poets under consideration found themselves, on the one hand, as having provided an alternative to the mythic, symbolic and allusive poetry of T.S. Eliot, Pound and others; on the other hand, in their revolt against the poetry of the forties, these poets propagated "conservatism," "building up" and "consolidation" as safest virtues. The ground on which they stood, gave nothing to them, except excessive discipline, excess of style, which murdered the vital links of the being of Apollo, and the inflated diction, distorted metaphor, and personal use of myth, which took poetry away from the common man; Christ became not the herdsman among his flocks but the Official Priest, sitting in the foundationless Imagery-Museum. The poets of the fifties, legitimately, and with a lot of justification, undertook to cleanse the temple and ask the Muse to sit, as in ancient times, and sing in conversational tone, simple, straightforward diction, and rhythms which could be normally breathed by the man on the street and rhymes which could be easily sung by mothers in the kitchen-rooms. John Wain explained the poet's position and the task ahead:

"The world had been dragged by two decades of meaningless peace and then suddenly battered nearly to death by global war. Worse, that war had ended with the fearful savagery of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; at last man's fingers had closed round the lever that, once pulled, would bring universal destruction. At such a time, when exhaustion and boredom in the foreground are balanced by fear and guilt in the background, it is natural that a poet should feel the impulse to *build*. Writing in regular and disciplined verse-forms is building in a simple and obvious sense, like brick-laying. Too simple, too obvious? Perhaps. But we were all very young and were doing the best we could to make something amid the ruins."²⁹

The notion that excess of feeling had impurified diction, and the unexpected breaks in syntax had shown, far too much, a break in sensibility, gained ground. Kingsley Amis, John Wain, who were the regular reviewers to the *Spectator*, and Donald Davie on the other side, discovered irony, wit, syntax, morality, as safe guides to the health of the poetry of the period. We shall soon see how most of the Movement poets took refuge in the eighteenth-century verse-forms and sensibility, and drew their models from it. Of the objectives and aspirations of the Movement poets, I refer to part of the article Anthony Hartley wrote in 1954 in the *Spectator*: "It is bored by the despair of the forties, not much interested in suffering, and extremely impatient of poetic sensibility, especially poetic sensibility about 'the writer and society.' So it's goodbye to all those rather sad little discussions about 'how the writer ought to live,' and it's goodbye to the Little Magazine and 'experimental writing.' The Movement, as well as being anti-phony, is anti-wit; sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers."³⁰

II

The pioneers of the Movement in English poetry were D.J. Enright and Robert Conquest whose anthologies³¹ delineated the outlines and were in the nature of first manifestoes as an argument in the art of the current necessities for poetic composition. Robert Conquest began his Introduction to the