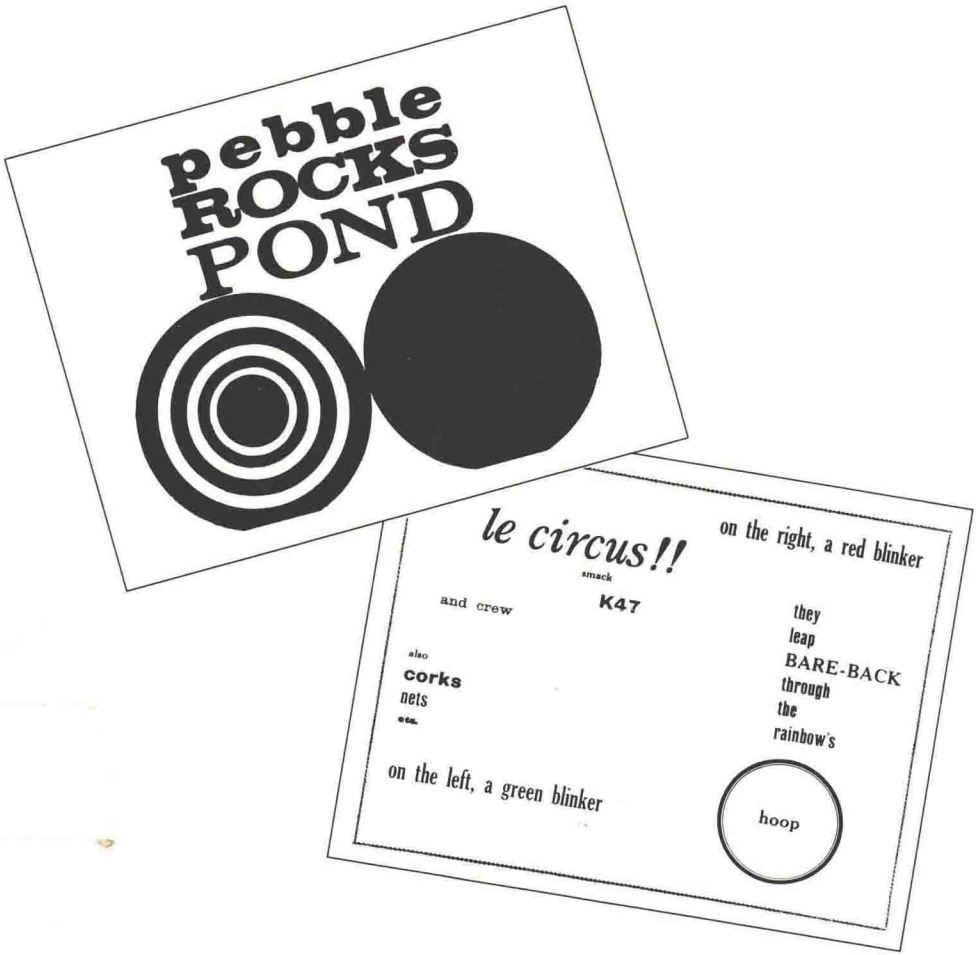
Contemporary British Poetry

Essays in Theory and Criticism



James Acheson and
Romana Huk

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PREFACE

Editing a book like *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* is a risky business, since the tradition behind it is replete with attempts at comprehensive mapping of named terrains. We were aware from the start that any full accounting for Britain's contemporary poetry scene would now be even less possible than it ever was, given how much has been happening in the very variegated field of these "poetries" and how little room we have between the covers of our collection. Competing with our desire to bring readers up to date with changes that have occurred over the last twenty years—changes that have received less attention than they deserve, particularly in literary circles outside the U.K.—was our desire to demonstrate some of the new ways that established figures more familiar to our audience are currently being (re)read; therefore, the book's time frame has also broadened beyond any possibility of inclusiveness, treating poems that range from, say, Donald Davie's or Ian Hamilton Finlay's work of the 1950s and 1960s to the new poems of Benjamin Zephaniah and Carol Ann Duffy. Yet we feel that the book's strengths lie not so much in its having drawn a tidy circle around its topic but rather in its forays into new textual territories, both poetic and critical; in other words, the widely ranging approaches taken by our essayists assume no set audience and contribute to no "evenness" of tone or theoretical/rhetorical register for the book as a whole. We felt that our topic demanded that we take the risk of substituting variety for conformity, due to the different readerships that these

poetries currently enjoy and the relatively neglected status of several of them. We accepted, for example, and not without concern, that some essays would focus singly on well-known poets with a critical tradition behind them, exploiting the latitude that such foundations afford for pursuing specific theoretical arguments, while others—such as the ones on black British poetry and poetry by women—would be more descriptive and of a "survey" nature in order to introduce the majority of our readers to both the poets and the major issues in their newly (and belatedly) formulating critical ground. Our book is bound to demonstrate the limitations inherent in projects of this kind; we hope nonetheless that it will move readers to investigate further not only the poems and poets discussed here, but also works by the many fine writers who happen to receive no mention along the way. As we write this, near the end of 1995, British poetry is experiencing a boom—an explosion of new talents, many fine small- and large-press publications, and a resultant rekindling of audience interest. *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* offers a stepping-stone to that scene, as well as an invitation and a provocation for others to produce further work in response to the vitality they find there.

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Introduction

Romana Huk

In recent years a number of fine collections of critical essays on Anglo-American modern and contemporary poetry have appeared, among them David Murray's *Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon*, whose focus spans the century, and Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson's *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, which devotes approximately one third of its space to current British work.[1] Another very recent arrival is Manchester University Press's 1993 volume *New British poetries: The scope of the possible* (ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry), whose narrowed focus on several strands of formally innovative poetries provides the space for some substantial and, in some camps, long-awaited theoretical exploration (which I will return to in a moment). But not since Carcanet Press's *British Poetry since 1970: a critical survey* (ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, 1980)—an update on their earlier book edited by Grevel Lindop and Michael Schmidt, *British Poetry since 1960: a critical survey* (1972)—has a volume exclusively focusing on a wide range of contemporary British "poetries" appeared, and never has there been such a book produced by an American press or written by an international group of writers. My coeditor and I have attempted to demonstrate something of the variety of possible conversations to be encountered on recent British poetry; we have done so by following (if rather loosely and, at times, critically) in the footsteps of Carcanet's editors, offering our readers some updates on new developments in poetry since Jones and Schmidt's 1980 volume, as well as a number of rereadings of the contexts and writers that volume featured (or neglected to feature) from new perspectives in critical theory and contemporary philosophy. Everything about our volume bespeaks variousness and not definitiveness: readers will

find in its pages a number of differing critical and theoretical languages at work that articulate what we believe are accessible if at times clashing views of the poetry, the poets, and their "postmodern" historical moment.

What *is* made certain by our volume is that much has changed since Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt wrote their introduction to *British Poetry since 1970*—both in terms of the sensibilities of the poets emerging on the scene since then and the means by which that scene and its predecessors have become represented by critics, academics, and (as a consequence) publishers. For example, the well-respected poet/critic Blake Morrison could write, in the Carcanet volume (and with his tongue only partly in cheek), that a rough sketch of the young poet of the 1970s would picture him—"for 'he' is still more likely to be the case"—as emerging from the professional or middle classes ("or if it is working class we are less likely to hear about this than we would have been in the 60s"); he would have attended grammar school and then gone on to university ("probably Oxford or Cambridge") and would "certainly have read English Literature."

> His politics are on the whole quietly conservative, and where they intrude into the poetry at all, it is as a kind of nostalgic liberal humanism. . . . He has a surprisingly strong respect for "traditional" forms, even strict meter and rhyme.[2]

This nonpolemical writer nostalgic for premodernist paradigms for poetry is, of course, the kind of poet readers of British poetry will recognize as belonging to the "Movement"—represented, perhaps most famously, by Philip Larkin and Donald Davie—which emerged during the 1950s and took good enough hold of the poetry scene to weather the cultural revolution of the 1960s (with its proliferation of new, radically "popular" poetic forms corresponding to social and moral upheaval) and come out ostensibly on top again in the 1970s. The Movement's judgment of the 1960s would no doubt be in sympathy with the retrospective judgment offered by the editors of the Carcanet volume that during that decade there were too many (and too "different") kinds of poetries emerging at once and far too rapidly for critical sorting: "The 1960s were spoiled by excess of opportunities and choices and by paucity of generously stringent critics."[3]

By contrast, recent anthologies of poetry like *the new british poetry* and

The New Poetry[4]—both of which allude by name to A. Alvarez's now legendary anti-Movement anthology, *The New Poetry*[5]—define and celebrate the current scene as being, like its supposedly emergent correlative in cultural politics, "pluralized" and undefinable, as the editors of *The New Poetry* make clear:

> Throughout the century, the hierarchies of values that once made stable poetics possible have been disappearing. In the absence of shared moral and religious ideals, common social or sexual *mores* or political ideologies, or any philosophy on the conduct of life, plurality has flourished.[6]

Not everyone is equally pleased about or convinced by the new poetic "democracy"[7] and the plurality of its forms and voices, as reviews in central poetry journals like *PN Review* have made clear.[8] But other long-standing poetry reviewers and theorists like Terry Eagleton remind us that the situation is at least increasingly one in which "the *marginal* becomes somehow central"[9]—a situation that has been fostered as much by the ascendency of certain kinds of literary theory and criticism as by the compelling presence of growing numbers of women poets, black poets from a range of differing cultural communities, poets writing out of postcolonial experience or submerged traditions in Scotland and Wales, regional and working-class poets, and poets of all inflections writing in experimental, oppositional and/or "poststructuralist" forms.

It is in fact arguable—and several essays in our volume present this view—that there is no such thing as the much-discussed "*new* pluralism" but rather a newly seen or newly acknowledged pluralism. Theorists, critics, teachers, and, in turn, their readers and students are now being *trained* to train a critical eye on literary history's occlusions: the women poets crowding behind Blake Morrison's hypothetical "he" in the 1970s, some of whom are discussed in this book by Claire Buck; the black artists anthologized in liminal publications such as James Berry's *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of Westindian Poets in Britain* back in 1976,[10] some of whom are discussed here by Alastair Niven; the triply marginalized female black poets *not* included in anthologies like Berry's but finally published in *A Dangerous Knowing* in 1985, and discussed here by C. L. Innes; the neomodernist or, as the authors

of *New British poetries* call them, the "Poetry Revival" poets who, as they claim, were edited out of British literary history until the 1980s[11] and who are discussed in our book by Edward Larrissy and John Matthias; such lists go on.

The crisis that the acknowledgment of all these differing artists on the poetry scene precipitates is primarily a crisis for conventional criticism because it is, in large part, one of judgment (and therefore power). Particularly in the first three examples above, "otherness" demands another kind of apprehension apart from the "standard"—one that the critic who is not from the social or cultural positioning at hand must learn yet remain always outside of, and one whose presence in the arena makes any final comparisons of "worth" between the different poetries difficult and even offensive. Postmodernism's method of revising Yeats's ominous line that "the center cannot hold" to read "the center *should* not hold" (meaning that it should be dismantled to reveal what it by definition marginalizes or suppresses) forces "judges" of poetry to look self-critically at their criteria for judgment and robs them of all tacitly granted authority. The continuing resistance to these poetries—demonstrated even by those anthologies that announce their circumspection—cannot easily be separated from resistance to the present era's indeterminacies and destabilizations of order and power that have aided in enabling the emergence of "plurality" by calling the very idea and ideal of cultural unity into question.

Such challenges become much more complex when one considers, as many of our essayists do, strategies recently practiced by poets of all positionings that launch threats at an even deeper stronghold of the liberal humanist tradition: its conception of the free-standing, unified "self," and that self's power to act through rather than as an instrument of language. Ironically, the same theories that fostered critical interest in marginalized voices have thrown them and all others under suspicion; the impossibility of escaping formation by dominant structures of thought embedded in language itself causes "voice" to become the site for a new sort of struggle in poetry. At stake are revised understandings of subjectivity and its relation to the public sphere; the pervasiveness of such issues, both thematically and formally, in recent poems is such that Peter Middleton in his essay in *New British poetries* feels safe in drawing a dichotomy between "dominant

poetries and those where subjectivity is put into question."[12] The new consciousness of the mediation of seemingly self-generated feelings and thoughts by ascendant forces in culture and history through language has of course had a profound effect particularly on the lyric—that supposed haven of the "private" self—but also on other forms, including narrative poetry and even elegy. One need only note the differences between the essays in *British Poetry since 1970* and the ones in this volume to realize that the writing of both poetic and critical work has as a result undergone a sea-change, though one produced, unlike Shakespeare's, by processes of *de*mystification from what have been perceived as various kinds of sorcery and illusion induced by the standard cultural narrative.

Middleton and the writers of *New British poetries* claim that the inevitable politicization of poetry that accompanies such recognitions about the self and language caused those Eric Mottram refers to as descendants of "the 1950s Axis orthodoxy"—or the Movement conglomerate "Conquest-Fraser-Larkin"—to actively exclude the poets that they understood to be harbingers of it.[13] *New British poetries* specifically identifies those expressly excluded as being the poets of *A Various Art* and *the new british poetry* or those poets who, according to the book's major argument, are described as having grown, like the language-centered poets of the United States, out of roots in an Anglo-American modernist tradition running back through Ashberyesque developments to Basil Bunting, David Jones, Hugh MacDiarmid, and (across the water) Charles Olson, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and (ultimately) Ezra Pound: poets including such diverse figures as Roy Fisher, J. H. Prynne, Allen Fisher, Elaine Feinstein, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Tom Pickard, Tom Raworth, and many more recently acclaimed poets mentioned in the book's lists of perceived adherents and sympathizers. The "return to Pound" after his long literal and figurative exile could, one might argue, only be comfortably accomplished (or written about) in a context such as the present, in which the individual's complicity in systemic cultural and intellectual violence is newly understood as the inevitable result of coming to being in language; thus it might be that in an interesting twist and reversal of literary history, Pound can be found by the authors of *New British poetries* to be in some ways no more politically reprehensible than his less forthcoming "Axis" accusers:

> Pound's fascism provides an excuse for ignoring his poetry, perhaps precisely because his "disastrous career"[14] raises unavoidably the question of the relations between poetry, history and politics, a question that Eliot's poetry or Larkin's occludes and mystifies. On the other hand, the tradition that Crozier mentions [in the introduction to *A Various Art*], which includes poets like Oppen, Zukofsky and Olson, repudiates Pound's fascism through an engagement with the issues of politics and poetics.[15]

Accepting that their hands are "always already" dirty in the Derridean sense—and that poetry is equally and inescapably permeated by not only politics and history but the history of *poetic* politics—the poets currently drawn to this particular strain of often highly theoretical poststructuralist art are able to recuperate Poundian political forays and "process" forms. Their reassertion of a vital link between contemporary British poetry and such modernist traditions has become the cornerstone joining an important new version of postmodernism's genealogy with the articulation of an increasingly disjunctive formal aesthetics—not too distantly related to that of the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets—involving poetry in the politics of discourse. In our volume, Edward Larrissy discusses more specifically the tensions present between an American and native British modernist influence on such poets, focusing his readings on three who appeared in *A Various Art*: J. H. Prynne, Andrew Crozier, and Veronica Forrest-Thomson. Theorizing that the British have practiced "only intermittently" the strain of "Romantic objectivism" that characterizes American projectivist art and other open forms, Larrissy brings the "knowing self-consciousness about discourse" he understands to undergird native neomodernism into seemingly unlikely dialogue with "organic" and process forms, locating a new hybrid at the intersection between modern Anglo-American trends.

The various readings, rereadings, and recontextualizations of poets writing at the juncture between modernist and postmodernist eras offered by Edward Larrissy, Antony Easthope, and John Matthias in this volume form interesting (if unplanned) complements for one another. Antony Easthope also calls up the "anti-Romantic" vision that has characterized British poetry (after a short tenure of neo-Romanticism in the 1940s) in order to trace the glimmer of postmodern perception that it made possible

in Donald Davie's early poems—those still wavering on the near side of the love/hate relationship with Ezra Pound's poetics demonstrated in Davie's critical work. With a "deliberately polemical intention," Easthope attributes "the failure of Englishness" to move, at that time, in the direction of such perceptions to "the undertow" of the dominant empirical tradition, which for decades held much of English poetry and philosophy back from engagement with ideas like those breaking on shore in mid-century France in the work of Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, Foucault, and others. Matthias, writing here about Roy Fisher (whom he included in his "neomodernist" anthology, *23 Modern British Poets*),[16] raises questions similar to Easthope's concerning the empirical tradition and poetry, only in this case his concern is with the way in which that tradition has tended to read Fisher's work—usually perceiving him as a "realist," particularly after the publication of "City," his long poem in an urban setting. Returning to what Fisher might have meant when he said in a 1973 interview that in his work he portrays "the discontinuous self," Matthias suggests that an "equivocal 'I'" as opposed to an "empirical 'I'" is at work in the poems—or an "I" that becomes part of each construction it makes out of what it perceives in modernist, "vorticist" fashion. Between the lines of Fisher's work, as Matthias discusses it, readers are able to glimpse pivotal arguments about authorship and language that were occurring in the background at the time, revolutionizing literary theory and causing/reflecting new directions in poetry as well.

Rather than "transvalu[ing]" the works discussed in them—turning them into proofs for literary theory, as the editors of *British Poetry since 1970* feared critical writings might do to poems that surrender to such explication—the essays in this volume that are focused on the oeuvres of well-established poets like Fisher invoke new thought in order to reinvestigate poems for workings that could not be perceived from what our predecessors valued: "perspectives provided by precedent."[17] For example, Nicholas Zurbrugg reconsiders the work of iconoclast Ian Hamilton Finlay—whose creations vanished into tradition's critical pigeonhole for concrete (meaning formally and therefore, the assumption goes, thematically radical) poetry—as evolving not only out of the experiments of modernism's avant-garde artists, and their "foreground[ed] signifier,"[18] but also out of complex, not simply "radical," responses to one form of 1960s anti-Movement poetry, the "confessionalist"

poem. Zurbrugg likens Finlay's reconception of the poetic image to Roland Barthes's reconceptions of the sign in his phases of structuralist and poststructuralist thought, suggesting that Finlay engages self-consciously with the uncontrollable slippage of images through visual and textual history yet uses that knowledge to resist *both* the innocent use of language as self-expression *and* concrete poetry's becoming "a mere typographic game" or dalliance with what postmodern theorists have termed "simulacra"—overwritten images, figures, and forms that have lost the significance they may have once held in historical context. The fall of the hypostatic image from myth into textual history also becomes the focus of Paul Giles's essay on the equally long, interrelated careers of Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn. Giles discusses both poets' early immersion in the mid-century American modernist search for "architectonic synthes[es]" of the national experience within new/old mythic frameworks, and their gravitation away from mythic symbolism "into history," through ironic uses of what Paul de Man described as the allegorical trope to indicate not mythic but linguistic prior constructions of meaning. Giles's reading of the significance of particularly Gunn's subsequent use of formal meters opens the field for the arguments that R. K. Meiners, Linda Kinnahan, and I attempt to make concerning the importance of reconceived methods of formalist reading in a poststructuralist age.

Until recently in Britain, a poem's adherence to conventional syntax and structures would almost routinely be interpreted as a sign of its acceptance, at least by and large, of the traditional moral and ethical structures of centralized English culture that historically gave rise to or adapted such forms. Donald Davie put the equation most baldly in an early articulation of Movement aesthetics when he drew correlations "between the laws of syntax and the laws of society, between bodies of usage in speech and in social life, between tearing a word from its context and choosing a leader out of the ruck."[19] Certainly much recent formal work does indeed demonstrate allegiance to the cultural order. However, given the gradual development of new sets of questions concerning the construction and imprisonment of subjectivity by linguistic and rhetorical structures, a new kind of "formality" can be discerned as having offered an effective (and indeed, some argue, the *only*) means of not only expressing a poet's awareness of the ineradicable influence of those structures but even of constructing, despite if necessarily *through* them, possible means of resistance. In Geoffrey

Hill's case, critics suggesting the presence of such an awareness in his work have remained opposed by those who would read his as an essentially conservative poetry, given its formality and obsession with the traditional themes of religion, war, and imperial history. In our volume, Meiners re-views both Hill's themes and forms as inherited elements of the poet's own construction in action, suggesting that his is a *formal* thematics: one in which the *contradictions* between the "site" for Hill's work—"in the shit" of linguistic history—and the oft-noted purity and chiseled beauty of his forms are what give rise to any available "meaning." In my own essay for the volume I attempt to contextualize similar strategies at work in the poems of Tony Harrison and Jon Silkin, both of whom were writing, like Hill, in Leeds at the beginning of the cultural/linguistic revolution, though theirs is poetry more overtly charged with working class and minority issues. By retrieving several fragments of the argument (which ranged from midcentury to the 1970s) over the changing nature of *littérature engagée* and its future in the postmodern arena, I attempt to draw relationships between developing poetic/formal and political philosophies and to understand their intersection as the generative matrix for a new form of "poetry of the committed individual."

Clearly any commitment to recovering the experience of the suppressed and unrepresented must become enormously vexed in the present theoretical climate; the art of "revolt" is for many less simple than it might have seemed in the 1960s. Certainly increasing numbers of women writers have found it difficult to continue what Claire Buck describes as the "Radical Feminist search for an authentic female nature" such as it might have been before patriarchal/discursive manipulation of it, though the idea is obviously an attractive one given that it binds women together in relation by identity, as a political force. Reconstructing the debate between early essentializing forces in feminist poetry and those writing from "marginalized" positions within it—Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley, for example, and those whose various poststructuralist awarenesses precluded participation in quite the same goals—Buck begins to rectify the "general failure to examine the place of the body of this work" in postwar cultural studies. Keeping an eye on the differing dynamics operant in American feminist poetry, she also discusses some reasons for "the difficulty about establishing a significant role for poetry [in Britain] as a mode of feminist cultural politics."

Taking up opposing problems raised, more recently, by the emergence of what some refer to as "postfeminism" in British women's poetry, Vicki Bertram engages frankly with what she understands to be its covert conservative politics of "judgment" leading women directly back into the textual confines of the liberal humanist tradition instead of toward its goal somewhere beyond gender politics. In her problematization of "the search for evaluative criteria" conducted by poets like Fleur Adcock and Carol Rumens, who have both edited influential new anthologies of women's poetry, Bertram deconstructs the reemergence of words like *universal* in discussions of feminine aesthetics as well as the resurrection of disparaging representations of the earlier feminist poets discussed by Buck, suggesting that such "new" developments leave us "no nearer having a satisfactory context within and against which poetry by women can be read and enjoyed than we were in the 1950s." The perpetuation of midcentury divisions between politics and poetry in British women's writing (made evident, ironically, by its politics of anthologization and exclusion as exposed by Buck and Bertram) has contributed to the isolation into which such work has been cast, particularly by American readers and critics, whose frequent misconception is that "there is nothing interesting or experimental happening in British women's poetry."

With the help of a transported context from the United States, Linda Kinnahan revises some of these misconceptions in a reading of the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy, which she sees as being no less (only differently) innovative and oppositional in its British context than the disruptive forms that have tended to be developed by North American women poets emerging out of organic traditions into the postmodern landscape of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Reconsidering Duffy's "more accessible form" as "mark[ing]," perhaps even more significantly than the disturbing displacements in signification of her North American neighbors, "an . . . engagement with [rather than a departure from] social discourse," Kinnahan locates formal strategies in Duffy's work that redraw the writer's individual and even gendered agency in the act of negotiating linguistically with her own selfhood as a construction "aware of its constructedness or its own grammar." Such awareness renews rather than precludes "feminism" or "commitment" in poetry, and formal readings such as Kinnahan's help to refute the charge of "nihilism so often leveled as criticism at poststructuralist interrogations of the humanist, autonomous self."