Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism

Dialogue and Estrangement

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To Sue, Jean and Paul

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This book's division into two parts is meant to suggest comparisons and contrasts between "mainstream" poetry and kinds of modernist writing which have been regarded, or are still regarded, as outside that pale. Part of its point is to draw attention to the neglect which has been suffered by the three senior poets Roy Fisher, Christopher Middleton and, to a lesser extent Edwin Morgan who are discussed in the second section. However, I also wish to celebrate the exciting achievements of the mainstream and to redefine the nature of those achievements in what seem to me the most appropriate terms.

Most of the causes for the marginalising of Fisher, Middleton and Morgan have their sources in literary history rather than in what is happening currently. The careers of all three ought to have taken off in the early 60s when each of them started to produce their best work. Unfortunately for them that was a period of exceptional narrowness in the outlook of those in charge of the commanding heights of the poetic economy. In particular, a powerful prejudice was operating – thanks to the realist legacy of the Movement – against the Modernist tradition to which all three owed allegiance. In coining the term "retro-modernist" to describe these poets I am referring to this allegiance and also distinguishing them from postmodernists like John Ashbery – this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

"Estrangement", then, refers to the way in which Fisher, Middleton and Morgan were (and to some extent still are) outsiders in British poetry. However, it also refers to what I take to be their most characteristic poetic strategy – their deployment of a relentless defamiliarising that is radically opposed to the consensual assumptions of the Movement. The realism of Larkin and the others depends upon a technique that implicitly, but consistently, refers to experiences and attitudes which are shared by poet and reader – it appeals, in other words, to a sense of familiarity. By contrast, the retro-modernism of Morgan, Fisher and Middleton wilfully,

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stubbornly, sometimes playfully but sometimes, also, austerely, insists on strangeness and difficulty. For this reason, it is the theorising of the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky which provides the most fruitful access to their poetry. In his essay "Art as Technique"[1] he refers to the way in which "If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic" (11). As an illustration of this he quotes a passage from Tolstoy's diary in which the novelist describes being unable to remember whether he had dusted a divan because the action of doing so had become so "habitual and unconscious" (12), and so, Shklovsky says, "life is reckoned as nothing":

> Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*
>
> (12)

Donald Davie has related this passage to Roy Fisher's description of himself as a "1920s Russian modernist" who subjects experience to "a slow-motion dismemberment"[2]. For in his repeated evocations of urban landscapes Fisher has used a wide range of techniques to overcome the way in which, through habit, those landscapes are perceptually erased. This has involved his poetry in a continual argument with realism whose project Fisher respects and whose techniques of detailed notation he deploys, but whose consensual assumptions he half-reluctantly but consistently deconstructs. What has especially concerned him is the way that the "real" changes according to the levels and kinds of subjectivity from which it is perceived: estrangement for Fisher is crucially achieved by moving from the hard clarity and objectivity of imagist techniques to effects which insinuate distortive states of mind and, beyond them, to effects which are sometimes painfully expressionist or wildly or playfully surrealist.

As Stan Smith points out, Christopher Middleton is similarly indebted to the theory of estrangement:

> This classical yet human distance is maintained by a deliberate employment of that "defamiliarisation" technique described by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (whom Middleton acknowledges on several occasions). The disjunctions, dislocations and unexpected collocations of his language, the experimental diversity of structure and theme, and a movement between extremes of abstrusity and explicitness, using the very opacity of his language to concentrate our gaze as if for the first time on familiar object and event, all enable Middleton to pursue that "defining of enigmas" which is for him the poetic vocation, exposing us to "the strangeness of being alive. . .the strangeness of living things outside oneself".[3]

This stress on strangeness is also evident in Edwin Morgan – even, paradoxically, in his Scottish nationalism. His scepticism about obsessively nationalist writing is one part of a generally centrifugal tendency in his outlook: he fears that self-consciously Scottish writing may distort experience, including Scottish experience, by artificially freezing it at a vanished historical moment and fencing it off from the rest of the world. This is anathema to him because one of his major concerns is that poetry should evolve strategies that enable it to cope with experience which is constantly unfixing the boundaries of the past. He worries, therefore, that a simplistic nationalism tries to impose fixed limits which misrepresent the shifting and elusive nature of the modern world. So he uses estrangement techniques partly in opposition to conservative nationalists who harp on the familiarity of the familiar. For those techniques suggest that a native place can only be thoroughly understood in the context of other places: they assume, too, that experience is radically unstable and that what is reassuringly fixed about familiar places and things is an illusion.

Inevitably, there is something self-consciously cerebral, even austerely so, about the rigorous application of estrangement techniques and this provides an important clue to why modernism has had a hard time in Britain where even many of the intellectuals are anti-intellectual. There is perhaps no more telling sign of the continuing

effect of this than the immense popularity of the crudely anti-modernist poetry of Wendy Cope.

On the other hand, mainstream poets in Britain have consistently raided modernism and employed its techniques for their own ends – Larkin repeatedly used imagism and Audenesque montage while subordinating them to a dominantly realist context, thereby subjecting them to a kind of repressive tolerance. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he evolved a poetic whose first concern was to establish a consensus with his readers based on shared experience – but that this poetic evolved through a dialogue with modernism can be seen clearly in his most important poem "The Whitsun Weddings". This amounts to a realist rereading of *The Waste Land's* fertility metaphor. What does all that Jessie Weston stuff really mean to someone living in industrial mid-twentieth century England? Something like this: numerous couples heading on the same train towards their wedding nights in a London "spread out in the sun/ Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat," and then "A sense of falling, like an arrow shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain".

What characterises the generations after Larkin is a growing refusal to allow one stylistic idiom to dominate – modernist and realist techniques jostle with each other in their work, producing a greater open-endedness than in the poetry of the Movement, a sense of a plurality of voices. Douglas Dunn, for example, starts out in *Terry Street*[4] looking like a realist poet influenced by Larkin. However, even in that first book there are other influences at work which insist on the importance of narrative point of view – the centre of consciousness moves deliberately from the poet to the street's residents and back again in a way that subverts any single-minded sense of what "reality" is. There are even in *Terry Street* hints of a surreal element in Dunn's thinking and this acquires increasing importance later linked to a powerfully political consciousness which insists on opposing dominant ideologies with an exploration of how profoundly different the world looks when it is viewed from the margins, when the voices of the politically muted are allowed to speak.

This mingling of the real and the surreal in Douglas Dunn is an example of the tendency of post-Movement mainstream poets to deploy a stylistic "mélange". This is a postmodernist phenomenon to the extent that it self-consciously upsets expectations and destabilises any authoritative vision of the world, and the writing of these poets (Paul Muldoon, James Fenton, Craig Raine) is often playful,

self-reflexive and parodic in the approved postmodernist way. However, once again the ability of the British to domesticate movements like this, to translate, assimilate and at the same time crucially alter them is in evidence. So where the work of thorough postmodernists is about the relentless deconstruction of the "real", there is in the work of even the most postmodernist of British poets a tendency to accord the real a residual respect and allow it a residual place.

Consequently, while recent mainstream British poetry has assimilated postmodernist concerns with self-reflexive fictiveness and with the way that language distorts and even constitutes the experiences it is supposed merely to describe, it has also persisted in believing in the reality of the political and moral issues it addresses. When it has evoked the postmodernist impossibility of speaking in a privileged voice it has tended, not to celebrate it as Ashbery's poems do, but to fret over it and struggle against it. This much at least the mainstream shares with Morgan, Fisher and Middleton who have retained a stubbornly pre-postmodernist resistance to pure fictiveness, and have persisted with a modernist anxiety over the boundaries of knowledge, with a modernist seriousness – even, at times, earnestness – about their explorations of the fragmentariness of being.

In mainstream poetry, however, there has been a tendency not so much to resist self-reflexive fictiveness as to incorporate it and deploy it as a technique alongside others. The stylistic "mélange" I referred to, though, is not mere eclecticism – it reflects a genuine concern to oppose single-minded visions of experience with a self-conscious emphasis on diversity and mutability. Much of the impetus for this is political, and arises from a post-Movement sensibility in British poetry which arises from cultural polyphony: where the Movement poetic assumed that writers and readers were white, English middle-class males, contemporary poetry is acutely aware of voices that insist on their differences from that model and draw attention to their class, gender, nationality or race. One of the most conspicuous characteristics of contemporary poetry, as a result, is the colloquial vividness and variety of its language, and this is not merely a question of mannerism but of something substantial and important, for

According to Bakhtin, each social group – each class, profession, generation, religion, region – has its own characteristic way of speaking, its own dialect. Each dialect reflects and embodies a set of values and a sense of shared experience. Because no two

individuals ever entirely coincide in their experience or belong to precisely the same set of social groups, every act of understanding involves an act of translation and a negotiation of values. It is essentially a phenomenon of interrelation and interaction.[5]

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the "dialogic", consequently, is the key idea in the first section of the book, as Victor Shklovsky's "estrangement" is the key idea of the second. These two are generally regarded as the most important of the Russian formalist critics. The importance of the dialogic lies in its emphasis (as opposed to the single voice of traditional lyric poetry) on the interrelation and interaction of voices. There is a postmodernist element in this in the way it opposes the privileging of any one voice but there is an anti-postmodernist element also in the way it dwells on the felt authenticity of each voice, and in the political urgency of its championing of, as it were, the under-voices; so Bakhtin attacks the

centripetal forces in sociolinguistic and ideological life. . .[which] serve one and the same project of centralizing and unifying the European languages. The victory of one reigning language (dialect) over the others, the supplanting of languages, their enslavement, the process of illuminating them with the True Word, the incorporation of barbarians and lower social strata into a unitary language of culture and truth.[6]

What must be said in favour of mainstream poetry in the past fifteen years is that it has been self-consciously the opposite of an exclusive club. It has been an anti-establishment establishment which has placed the margins at the centre. Irish poets like Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon have been involved with a subtle but persistent critique of the values of the British heartland. Tony Harrison and Douglas Dunn[7] have declared themselves working-class "barbarians" dedicated to opposing the dominance of reigning languages. Their poetry assaults the "True Word" with a dialectical use of dialect – or rather a dialogical use since the argument is open-ended and without even a prospective synthesis. They oppose "Received Pronunciation" with the conviction that the way language is used is inevitably political and the imposition of one dialect on another is a form of censorship, a suppression of a value system as well as a voice. Similarly, women poets have been concerned to show the extent to which the "unitary language of culture and truth" actually

imposes a masculinist vision on those, both men and women, who use it. In opposing this their poetry has evoked a subtle dialogue of genders which, while chary of essentialist simplifications, has explored the boundaries of the feminine and the masculine, and exposed the way that the "True Word" is a masculine monologue, a gendered monolith.

What is involved in this insistence on polyphony, however, is not mere pluralism. It is not a question of the bland tolerance of difference but of a profound sense that the self has no meaning except in interrelation with others, and that the lived experience of the self can only be expressed through determined efforts to evoke the otherness with which the self continuously interacts.

In the course of their dialogic projects these poets have evolved styles which are self-consciously, even confrontationally impure and unstable. Contemporary poetry has undergone what Bakhtin calls "novelisation" in the sense that, like the novel, it is not generically stable but self-consciously incorporates other generic elements and expectations, it is a hybrid form that cross-fertilises diverse languages.

Sylvia Plath's comparison of the two genres is instructive here:

> If a poem is concentrated, a closed fist, then a novel is relaxed and expansive, an open hand: it has roads, detours, destinations; a heart line, a head line; morals and money come into it. Where the fist excludes and stuns, the open hand can touch and encompass a great deal in its travels.
>
> I have never put a toothbrush in a poem.
>
> I do not like to think of all the things, familiar, useful and worthy things, I have never put into a poem. I did, once, put a yew tree in. And that yew tree began, with astounding egotism, to manage and order the whole affair. It was not a yew tree by a church on a road past a house in a town where a certain woman lived. . .and so on, as it might have been, in a novel. Oh no. It stood squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard, the clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated it – everything! I couldn't subdue it. And, in the end, my poem was a poem about a yew tree. That yew tree was just too proud to be a passing black mark in a novel.[8]

What Plath considers "poetic" is a concentrated kind of expression focused upon images. Her assumptions are Romantic in origin in

their concern with a kind of Nature/Mind dialectic – the state of mind of the poet is involved with an ontological struggle with the objects of nature in which the end of struggle is a kind of synthesis, a transcendant tying up of loose ends. Her own most characteristic version of this is an expressionism in which a powerful state of mind imposes itself so much on what surrounds it that everything is perceived in the terms of that state of mind. In "Parliament Hill Fields"[9], for example, the poet's preoccupation with a miscarriage makes the "spindling rivulets" she refers to a displaced equivalent of the dwindling of amniotic fluid. In her hands, then, the Nature/ Mind dialectic is resolved in favour of Mind: the yew tree takes over the poem because it becomes the displaced equivalent of the poet's all-consuming point of view. Paradoxically, Plath's famous onto-logical insecurity results in her psyche spilling over onto everything.

For this reason, Plath's own poetry is very much the opposite of novelistic expression. In the use her work makes of the poetic image "all activity – the dynamics of the images-as-word – is completely exhausted by the play between the word (with all its aspects) and the object (in all its aspects)". (*D.I.*, 278)

A Plath poem is a rarefied kind of expression, a "closed fist" which "excludes and stuns" – the yew tree is removed from its daily context and deployed in a way that draws upon all its tradi-tional symbolic associations which are newly focused by Plath's particular ontological concerns. It is their "egotism" which gives her poems their power; the way they narrow down, "manage and order the whole affair" creates a singular and uniquely Plathian "world" with its characteristically skewed and obsessive vision. The point about the lack of toothbrushes in this world is that they are objects which have a social rather than an ontological meaning and are excluded because of their lack of expressionistic clout.

So it is partly what is excluded from Plath's poems that accounts for their strange force – they are bizarrely pure lyrics. By contrast, the poetry of Paul Muldoon, James Fenton, Craig Raine, Fleur Adcock and Carol Ann Duffy refers itself to an altogether different tradition where the emphasis is on the dialogic rather than the dialectic, on the juxtaposition of worlds rather than the refining of a single world. In their poems synthesis is avoided in favour of an open-ended argument which preserves a vivid and untidy lack of reconciliation. This tradition goes back at least to Byron's *Don Juan* (which delib-erately deploys images for their social rather than their symbolic meaning), and also includes, most prominently, Robert Browning,

George Meredith's *Modern Love* and early T.S. Eliot. In these novelised poets there is an "open hand" rather than a "closed fist", there are "roads, detours, destinations". Their work resembles that of the novelist to the extent that its images are not primarily concerned (in Bakhtin's terms) with the play between the word and the object; in them, as in the work of novelists, the yew tree may well stand "by a church on a road past a house in a town where a certain woman lived":

> the object reveals first of all precisely the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgements. Instead of the virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it. For the prose writer, the object is the focal point of heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound, these voices create the background necessary for his own voice.
>
> *(D.I.,* 278)

Estrangement and the dialogic are not mutually exclusive. There are dialogic elements in the poets in my second section, especially in Edwin Morgan, and the poets in my first section, especially Craig Raine, all defamiliarise their material in one way or another. My focus on each as key terms is meant merely to draw attention to what is most characteristic in the two generations: estrangement in the retro-modernist, anti-Movement poets, the dialogic in the post-Movement poets with their hesitations between realism, modernism and postmodernism. Where the former work constantly at evoking strangeness, the latter tend to arbitrate between strangeness and familiarity, which is evoked both as a realist resource and as a device for opposing hierarchy and authoritarianism. In this they are calling upon what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque, which is partly about "familiarisation":

> All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*

. . .Linked with famiarization is a third category of the carnival sense of the world: *carnivalistic mésalliances*. A free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena and things. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical world view are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, weds and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.[10]

So, while there is an emphasis on detachment, cool analysis and dissection or dismemberment in the estrangement poets, there is a contrary tendency in the dialogic poets towards a promiscuous mingling of materials, an enjoyment of hybrid forms and images, a conflating of voices and perspectives. In the "Martian" poets there is a constant reference back to the familiar in the dialogue between, in particular, the domestic and the exotic, and the sacred and the profane – there is an "humane" retrieval of the unfamiliar, its re-instalment in the familiar. Similarly, in the self-consciously hybrid forms of Paul Muldoon, there is a combining of materials which bring diverse images, languages and genres into familiar contact with each other.

The diversity of mainstream poetry at the moment makes it exciting and vigorous. Current and recent editors of a number of magazines have, through their broad-mindedness, encouraged a fascinating range of writing – Peter Forbes at *Poetry Review*, Alan Jenkins at the *TLS*, Karl Miller at the *London Review of Books*, Michael Schmidt at *PNReview*, Robert Crawford at *Verse*. Because of this the distinction between "mainstream" writing and the rest is increasingly difficult to maintain: when a stream is as broad as this it can, at any time, incorporate its tributaries. For this reason it ought to be all the easier, now, to accord Fisher, Middleton and Morgan the recognition they deserve. Moreover, despite the current strength of mainstream poetry there is still much it could learn from these senior figures. For the dialogic writing I have been describing has tended to call upon linguistic ready-mades, upon pre-existent forms, and mingled them. By contrast, the retro-modernists have been immensely fertile in their invention of new forms – they have been restlessly experimental in a way that only James Fenton has been in the mainstream. Most of what they have discovered in the course of their experiments remains to be absorbed by other poets. Moreover, there