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'I MISTRUST THE POEM': THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

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by Ian Michael Scoones

The object of this study is to analyse the history of controversy in post-war British poetry. It argues that these controversies can be described as constituting a crisis of representation. The history of controversy is analysed through a discussion of several key anthologies. These anthologies describe a development in terms of three stages. First the establishment of a canon. Second a revisionist response to the canon. Third a period of rapprochement. To this end it groups together New Lines (1956), The New Poetry (1962), and The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry (1982), as constituting the representative anthologies of the canonical poetry. It uses The New British Poetry (1988) as the representative revisionist anthology. The New Poetry (1993) is the representative anthology of the period of rapprochement. Representation refers to three themes in post-war British poetry. First, it relates to the controversies surrounding the selection of poets to stand in as representative of the wider field of poetic endeavour. Second, it refers to the different formal strategies employed in contemporary poetry. Third, it refers to the way in which poetry can have a delegatory function, giving voice to, and speaking for, the concerns of particular group identities. The thesis argues that the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry can be located at the point where the claims made by anthologies to representative status are called in question, and the demand that poetry represent group identities conflicts with the imperatives of certain formal strategies. It challenges prevailing accounts of the history of controversy that see the post-war period as divided between a conservative mainstream and a radical margin. It argues that a movement beyond the impasse of this false binary can be achieved if attention is paid to the continuities between the mainstream and the margin rather than to the polemics of literary dispute.

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Introduction

The history of post-war British poetry has been one of controversy. I propose to use several key anthologies, beginning with Robert Conquest's 1956 anthology *New Lines* which have attempted to map the post-war period, as a convenient way to discuss the significance of this history of controversy. [1] Of course, anthologies themselves generate controversy. This is not surprising given their constitutive function of selecting a few poets to stand in as representative of the wider field of poetic endeavour and consequently rejecting many other poets as unrepresentative. Such controversy may seem inevitable and, therefore, unremarkable. As Roy Fisher, a poet who I will suggest is central to this discussion, has remarked, the 'purpose' of poetry is 'constantly to set up little enmities'.[2] Anthologies, it might be supposed, simply concentrate these 'enmities'. However, I believe that the controversies surrounding anthologies of contemporary British poetry point to issues more significant than merely the perennial irascible tendencies of quarrelsome poets. The anthologies of contemporary British poetry, their polemic introductions and their selections of poems, constitute a fabric of relations which can be read to reveal not only the changing map of contemporary British poetry but also a map of this diverse body of work's attempt to negotiate the complexities of post-war Britain.

My decision to use a selection of key anthologies to frame this discussion of the history of post-war British poetry is a strategic one in two senses. First, by concentrating on a few anthologies I will be able to make manageable a field that would otherwise be too vast for discussion within the confines of this thesis. Second, by deliberately focussing on a handful of anthologies in order to reduce the size of my undertaking, I will be foregrounding the constitutive function of the anthology form itself: the selection of a few poets to stand in as representative of the wider field of poetic endeavour. As a result I will pay particular attention to the significance of the concept of representation. I will take it to refer to three themes in post-war British poetry. First, I will relate it to the controversies surrounding the selection of a few poets to stand in as representative of the wider field of poetic endeavour. Second, I will be

concerned with the way in which the term refers to the different formal strategies employed in contemporary poetry. Third, I will consider the way in which poetry can have a delegatory function, giving voice to, and speaking for, the concerns of particular group identities. My contention is that the crisis of representation referred to in the title of this thesis is to be located at the fraught conjunction of these three aspects of contemporary British poetry's representative function. It is a conjunction where the claims made by anthologies to representative status are called into question, and the demand that poetry represent group identities conflicts with the imperatives of certain formal strategies. My purpose is not to offer any resolution to this crisis, since it is not a crisis that can readily be resolved, nor, perhaps, should be resolved. Rather, my intention is to set out what the crisis entails, and what can be learnt from it.

Which Anthologies?

The most comprehensive account of the role played by anthologies in the construction of a contemporary canon of British poetry is Nick Jones's 'Brokers of Heritage: Anthologies and Tradition in Contemporary British Poetry'. In this study, and two allied papers which focus more narrowly on the dissemination of the contemporary canon to the school examination system, Jones offers a detailed analysis of those anthologies which have attempted to map British poetry in the period 1950-1984.[3] I will describe Jones's research in some detail because it will provide an opportunity for me to explain the structure of this thesis.

Jones's significant contribution towards the delineation of the post-war anthological tradition is to develop a model of the anthological process itself. Jones distinguishes three 'Orders' of anthology, together with a fourth, or 'preliminary' category. By 'preliminary' anthologies Jones means to suggest 'those publications, typically annuals, which offer the reader an essentially non-committal *sample* of recent writing'.[4] His examples include projects such as *The Guinness Book of Poetry*, the P.E.N. *New Poems* series, and The Arts Council sponsored *New Poetry*. These collections offer their contributors a slightly more permanent literary foothold than an appearance in a small poetry magazine would offer, but 'they do not in themselves confer any special status upon the

works or the authors included, nor do they argue for such status; their presentation simply affirms that the poems are in their various ways worthy of attention' (p. 41). By contrast a 'First Order' anthology, Jones suggests, is 'polemical':

> It aims to bring sharply into focus a particular body of work which has not yet gained sufficiently widespread public and critical attention. It is therefore both innovative and partisan, throwing into critical relief a relatively small number of poets of about the same age, whose work is perceived as possessing a shared urgency, and in some cases an underlying unity, of a significant though often ill-defined nature. Such anthologies are deliberate interventions into the course of a contemporary tradition which they thereby seek to revalue. (p. 41)

Examples of 'First Order' anthologies cited by Jones include *New Lines*, *The New Poetry*, and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*.[5] Whereas, Jones suggests, polemic is the characteristic mode of the 'First Order' anthology, the 'Second Order' anthology is characterised by a more 'judicial' tone corresponding to the task of its editor to 'reappraise the selections of previous anthologists in the light of both personal judgement and current opinion, and to consider which of the emergent First Order poets deserve to be assimilated into the main tradition' (p. 43). The anthologist's authority, Jones points out, is two-fold:

> He is himself a figure of some standing in the mainstream of English letters [...] whom only excessive modesty can deny a place in his own selection. He is also the chosen agent of a publishing house that has earned a privileged position within the institution of Literature: Oxford, in its role as custodian of the heritage, both of the literary classics and of the national language; Faber, whose record in the matter of modern verse has not yet been surpassed; or Penguin, to whom is due the deference of being the most widely read. The particular authority of these institutions is embodied in the formula by which the volumes are titled — 'The____Book of Modern/Contemporary/Twentieth Century Verse' — in which the definite article, and the oddly specialized connotations, in this context, of the word 'Verse', confirm the high status of the enterprise. (pp. 43-44)

Examples of such anthologies would include *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*, *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945-1980*, and *British Poetry Since 1945*.[6] Jones's final category of anthology is different from the previous three in that it is targeted to the specific readership of school level

examination candidates of 'English Literature': 'It is therefore essentially a distributive anthology, which aims to select, from the available tradition, a body of work conforming to the highly specific perceived requirements of a targeted (and captive) readership, which may be further identified by age-band and "ability-level"' (p. 44). Although, as David Trotter has pointed out,[7] such school-level teaching anthologies can play an important role in the consolidation of a hegemonic poetic practice, their essentially 'distributive' function renders them peripheral to this study. However, Jones's taxonomy is germane to my purposes for two reasons. First, it identifies an important aspect of the function of anthologies. Second, it offers a means of defining a contemporary canon.

The important function of anthologies that Jones identifies is their attempt to legitimise partial selections of poets as representative of the wider field of poetic endeavour. The strength of Jones's taxonomy is that it draws on Raymond Williams's account, in *Keywords* and *Marxism and Literature*,[8] of the political and ideological determinations of the concept of 'Literature', to argue that the function of anthologies is to 'construct poetry as literature, and ultimately [...] as Literature, within a controlled and developing "anthological tradition"' (p. 40). What is at stake here is literary authority, and Jones is correct to point to the formula that combines a prestigious imprimatur with the signature of a leading mainstream poet, as an important signifier of such authority. However, Jones's taxonomy is misleading in that it sets too much store by the judicial authority invested in second order anthologies, and consequently it underplays the significance of the controversies provoked by first order anthologies. On the one hand, the authority of second order anthologies is not guaranteed. The paradigmatic second order anthology discussed by Jones is *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* edited by Philip Larkin. Although the Oxford imprimatur offers the appearance of authority, and although Larkin assumed the mantle of editor by virtue of his status as the leading mainstream poet of the day, the anthology has been notoriously controversial.[9] On the other hand, as Jones admits in a footnote alluding to the 'presumption' (p. 47) of Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, polemic first order anthologies also assert the claims of literary authority invested in the direct article and the backing of a prestigious publishing house. I want to suggest

that it is in the polemic that Jones associates with first order anthologies that the process whereby poetry is constructed as literature can best be seen. It is by focussing on the pattern of values within which polemic anthologies are inscribed, and the controversies that they set in train, that the emergent contemporary canon can be analysed.

However, it is important to consider the date at which Jones expresses such trust in the legitimating function of second order anthologies, since the 1980s mark a significant juncture in the history of post-war British poetry. 'It is', Jones argues, 'the names of poets, rather than the poems these names represent, that form the principal tokens of exchange within the economy of such a tradition'.[10] By tallying the poets selected for inclusion in the second order anthologies across the period 1950-1984, Jones is able to demonstrate that, despite quarrels around the time of the publication of *New Lines* in 1956, and the controversies which raged during the 'cultural fission' of the 1960s, the tradition has been remarkably uniform. Surveying the period midway, Jones points out that, 'Of the poets who had emerged during the 1950s, seven names appear in all three of the second order anthologies published in 1965:[11] Donald Davie, Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, R.S. Thomas, Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, and Charles Tomlinson, represent at this point the acknowledged mainstream of contemporary English poetry' (p. 109). At the end of the period, Jones argues, the five second order anthologies in print,[12] 'represent the authorised version of contemporary British poetry as at present constructed' (p. 237). Six names, those of Larkin, Gunn, R.S. Thomas, Hughes, Hill, and Tomlinson, appear in all five of these anthologies, and also appeared in all three second order anthologies published in 1965 (p. 238).

Jones's head-count of poets included in second order anthologies is a crude but significant measure of canonicity. Its significance lies in the self-evident narrowness of the consensus that he reports to have existed during the 1980s. Jones's list of canonical white male poets is obviously exclusionary in terms of gender and ethnicity. The fact that the work of these poets is published by mainstream presses, and with the exception of Tomlinson is also predominantly formally conservative, points towards the further exclusion of experimental and small press poetries. As extraordinary as this narrow consensus seems from the

perspective of the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jones's findings do not go against the grain of mainstream opinion at the time. Blake Morrison, for example, contributing to an important critical survey of British poetry in 1980, offered this sketch of the representative poet of the period:

> His politics [...] for 'he' is still more likely to be the case [...] are on the wholequietly 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 stricter meter and rhyme.[13]

What I want to suggest is important about this is that Jones's report of this state of affairs during the mid 1980s represents the last date at which it is possible to describe contemporary British poetry in terms of such a narrow consensus. The history of exclusion reported by Jones describes the story of contemporary British poetry as told by its anthologies up to the late 1980s. Until this point the most widely available map of contemporary British poetry had seriously misrepresented the terrain it had set out to describe. By the late 1990s, however, the map of contemporary British poetry had undergone a profound transformation, and surveying the story from the beginning of the twenty-first century it is possible to argue that since the end of the 1980s the tendency of anthologies has been towards the representation of the plurality of contemporary British poetries.

Jones's survey of anthologies published between 1950 and 1984 seems aware that it is caught on the cusp of this transformation, noting that towards the end of the period under consideration 'the centre held' but elsewhere 'the "Balkanisation" of British poetry was continuing apace'.[14] Since the end of the 1980s the 'centre' of British poetry has been split open and consequently the tendency of anthologies, as I have described, has been towards the representation of the plurality of contemporary British poetries.

The cut-off date of Jones's research, therefore, coincides with a sea-change in the approach of anthologists to their task of mapping post-war British poetry. I propose an analysis of the periods both before and after this sea-change through a

discussion of several key anthologies. These anthologies, I suggest, describe a development in terms of three stages. First the establishment of a canon. Second a revisionist response to the exclusions of the canon. Third a rapprochement in which the mainstream attempts to respond to the accusations of exclusivity levelled against it by expanding its boundaries to include a wider representation of poetries than previously had been the case. To this end I will group together three polemic anthologies, *New Lines*, *The New Poetry*, and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, as constituting the representative texts of the canonical poetry. I will use *The New British Poetry* as the representative anthology of the revisionist response to the exclusions of the canon as codified by *New Lines*, *The New Poetry*, and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. The period of rapprochement is best represented by Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*. However, the proximity of this re-examination of the history of post-war poetry to the end of the century and the commencement of the new millennium has coincided with the temptation to produce wider surveys of the post-war period than is usually possible in a polemic anthology. I therefore propose to include for consideration two end of century surveys, *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* and *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, which attempt to celebrate contemporary plurality and to redress historical injustices.[15]

What Crisis?

This schema of canon formation followed by revisionist attack and subsequent rapprochement, however, is not meant to imply a neat teleological progression from dissent to harmony. Far from endorsing enthusiastic celebrations of postmodern pluralism, I will suggest that the attempts of such anthologies as *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* and *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* to address contemporary diversity and to redress historical exclusions are flawed in a way that is symptomatic of the first aspect of the crisis of representation that this thesis sets out to explore: the sheer weight of these volumes is testimony to the calling into question of claims to representative status.

The second aspect of the crisis of representation has been well described by Sean O'Brien as an 'ancient family row' between traditionalists and modernists. O'Brien cites A. Alvarez's famous polemic against *New Lines* in his 1962 introductory essay to *The New Poetry*.[16] In this essay Alvarez describes an opposition between the formal experimentation associated with modernism and the formal conservatism associated with the English poetic tradition and championed by Conquest's anthology. As O'Brien summarises it, 'Alvarez suggests an antithesis: on the one hand is the American capacity to build on the formal and historical curiosity and rigour of modernism, adapting it to deal with the crises of contemporary life; on the other is a reactionary, "genteel" retirement of English poets into an inertly notional tradition' (p. 207). O'Brien comments on this that:

> Half a lifetime later this distinction may seem so burdened with exceptions and contradictions as to be unhelpful, but its terms function like an ancient family row in the background of recent poetry. The business may not be explicitly referred to very often, but everyone knows it's there, and its echoes are heard from generation to generation. Even when the current subject of concern appears to be rather different [...] the antithesis reproduces itself – modernity versus tradition, avant-garde versus mainstream, establishment versus rebels – sometimes with allegedly identical positions taken up by people who given the chance, would go back and run each other over twice to be certain. The contributors to Iain Sinclair's anthology *Conductors of Chaos* might as well be writing a different language from the poets included in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* or even the vast majority of those in Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*. Yet many of them could be – have been – described as postmodernist poets. (p. 207)

This passage confirms the importance of anthologies in mediating the controversies in post-war poetry, and contains much that is pertinent to my discussion of the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry. From *New Lines* to *Conductors of Chaos*, it has been anthologies that have described the divisions within contemporary British poetry. Significantly these divisions have formed around questions of definition: should contemporary British poetry be thought of in terms of a formally conservative 'English' traditionalism, as against the more formally adventurous modes of modernism or postmodernism. The mutual animosity that O'Brien discerns in his depiction of this ancient

family row between traditionally inclined formal conservatives and the adherents of modernist or postmodernist experimentation has had a profound impact upon the way in which commentators read contemporary British poetry.

The mutual hostility is such, O'Brien suggests, that it would lead proponents on either side 'to go back and run each other over twice to be certain'. Although O'Brien's account contains a certain amount of hyperbole, there is genuine animosity and contempt at work in the situation he describes. Sinclair in his introduction dismisses Morrison and Motion as 'those purposefully offensive style cowboys' (p. xvi), and Morrison has expressed a hostile indifference towards the work of the avant-garde, arguing that 'the poems themselves look wan'.[17] Despite the boast of the editors of *The New Poetry* that their collection heralds 'the end of British poetry's tribal divisions', not a single poet included in Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos* was deemed worthy of the Bloodaxe anthology's 'new cohesiveness'. For his part Sinclair has condemned what he regards as the 'sinister phenomenon' of the 'New Generation' poets, many of whom were prominent contributors to *The New Poetry*. These poets, he suggests, 'have arrived in our midst like pod people' (p. xvi). This animosity is particularly evident in the furore surrounding the reception of the two key revisionist anthologies *A Various Art* and *The New British Poetry*. Eric Mottram, introducing a selection of work by British modernists in a section of *The New British Poetry* significantly entitled 'A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry', argues that, 'From Robert Conquest's *New Lines* and G.S. Fraser's *Poetry Now* (the classic 'Movement' anthologies, both published in 1956) through to Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), an assumed singular authority of a certain narrow range of British poetry has been maintained'.[18] Mottram's claim is supported by Andrew Crozier in his introduction to *A Various Art*, who agrees that, 'the redefinition of taste in the 1950s had had to be enacted by means of a wholesale rewriting of and reorientation towards the history of modern poetry, and this included the virtual suppression of parts of it'.[19] On the other hand, examples of mainstream critics unreflectively hostile to the work of the avant-garde are legion, as a brief survey of some of the reviews of avant-garde anthologies illustrates. *A Various Art* was dismissed by a senior, mainstream poet, Peter Porter in the *Observer* as 'a

highbrow solidarity' whose audience 'would seem to be confined to the poets who contribute to it'; its leading poet, J.H. Prynne, Porter ridiculed as 'hermetic and priestly: he wants disciples not readers'.[20] Peter Forbes, editor of the key mainstream journal *Poetry Review*, has berated the formally innovative poets collected in *The New British Poetry*: 'To communicate is not their aim: poetry is a priesthood and so long as the brethren can interpret the runes, then the jeers of the public are their badge of honour'.[21] In a review of Iain Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos*, the leading 'New Generation' poet Don Paterson singled Prynne out as a 'turkey [...] for whom the accidental formulation of a simple expository sentence that could be understood by a reader of average intelligence would, I assume, cause him to hang himself from shame'.[22]

Romana Huk, in her introduction to a recent survey of contemporary British poetry, has described how this history of antagonism has entailed that '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'.[23] Clair Wills, has described how such discussions set up 'a familiar division between formally conservative poetic practices' and 'radical experimental "artifice"'. Conservative poetics 'do not question the drive towards romantic modes of self-expression, the "poetic" voice, or the centre of the poem as a speaking "I"'. Experimental poetry, on the other hand, 'is defined as poetry which in its formal mechanisms recognises the primacy of language over thematic concerns, and at the same time deconstructs the possibility of a coherent or consistent lyric voice'.[24]

The third aspect of the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry results from this opposition between 'conservative' and 'radical' poetic practices. The binary suggests the possibility of an alliance of all marginalised poetries against the 'conservative' mainstream. However, any such alliance is extremely fragile. This fragility can be located in the doubled set of connotations of representation. The first set of connotations signify a concern to account for the process of cultural transmission by which what is evidently only one construction among many competing constructions succeeded in becoming dominant and

thereby secured representative status. It is at this level that the poetries of formal innovation and identity politics share a history of marginalisation and exclusion. However, the second set of connotations concern the use of poetry by marginalised groups as a means towards symbolic representation within the public sphere, and the avant-garde critique of modes of poetic representation that claim to represent the self. The avant-garde critique of representation takes language itself as the object of its focus, rather than any referent or subjectivity that might be represented by language. This results in a splitting open of the tentative alliance between the marginalised poetics of formal innovation and the politics of identity, a splitting which hinges upon a dispute over the political usefulness of the category of representation itself.

I will argue that this threefold crisis of representation (the apparent impossibility of achieving a truly representative anthology, the opposition between 'conservative' and 'radical' poetries, and the collapse of the alliance between identity poetries and experimental poetries against the mainstream) has been dominated by the hostility of the 'family row' between traditionalists and experimentalists. Certainly there have been good reasons for this. However, I will suggest that this hostility has obscured important continuities between mainstream and experimental poetries. In particular I will argue that both traditions in the post-war period have grappled with what has been described from the mainstream perspective by Seamus Heaney as the poet's imperative to discover forms 'adequate to our predicament', and from the avant-garde perspective by D.S. Marriott as the pursuit of a 'poetic artifice capable of dealing with the complexification of the post-war world.[25] If readers and critics can look beyond the name-calling of the 'family row' then, I suggest, the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry can be read as a map of this varied body of work's attempt to negotiate the complexities of post-war Britain.

Having discussed the nature of my argument, I will provide a brief breakdown of the structure of the thesis itself. In Chapter One I will trace the formation of the mainstream poetic from *New Lines* to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. In Chapter Two I will chart how in *The New British Poetry* a potentially radical alliance of identity poetries and the poetics of formal

innovation founders over the doubled set of connotations pertaining to the concept of representation. In Chapter Three I will describe the way in which postmodern plurality fails to make good its promise of a truly representative account of the post-war period. However, Chapter Three will mark the turning point in my argument as I move away from a description of the crisis towards an analysis of its significance. In the second part of Chapter Three I will suggest via a discussion of Peter Reading that the caricature of postmodern theories offered by the editors of Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry* obscures the engagement of contemporary poetics with the problem of the relationship between poetic form and experience. My discussion of Peter Reading will lead me in Chapters Five and Six to a fuller discussion of the continuities between 'radical' and 'conservative' treatments of the problem of the relationship between poetic form and experience. Roy Fisher, whose short poem 'It is Writing' provides the epigraph to this study, will emerge here as the key figure in my discussion of post-war British poetry as a consequence of his liminal status as an avant-garde poet with a mainstream audience.[26] In the Conclusion I will close the thesis with a discussion of the way in which, looking beyond the 'family row' between traditionalists and experimentalists, the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry can be read as a map of this varied body of work's attempt to negotiate the complexities of post-war Britain.

Endnotes

[1] *New Lines*, ed. by Robert Conquest, (London: Macmillan, 1956).
[2] Roy Fisher, from 'The Making of the Book', in *The Dow Low Drop: New and Selected Poems* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996), p. 85.
[3] Nick Jones, 'Brokers of Heritage: Anthologies and Tradition in Contemporary British Poetry' (unpublished MPhil thesis, University of Leicester, 1987); Nick Jones, 'On Anthologies', in *The Use of English*, 35.1 (1983), 39-47; Nick Jones, 'Anthologies and "English Literature"', in *The Use of English*, 35.2 (1984), 65-73.
[4] Jones, 'On Anthologies', p. 41.
[5] *The New Poetry*, ed. by A. Alvarez (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; Revised 1966); *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, ed. by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).
[6] *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*, ed. by Philip Larkin (Oxford: OUP, 1973; Reissued 1997); *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945-1980*, ed. by D.J. Enright (Oxford: OUP, 1980);*British Poetry Since 1945*, ed. by Edward Lucie-Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970; Revised 1985).
[7] See David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1984; Reprinted 1985), pp. 242-250.
[8] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976; Revised 1983; Reissued 1988), pp. 183-188; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977; Reprinted 1990), pp. 45-54.
[9] See Andrew Motion's 'Foreword' to the 1997 reissue, pp. viii-ix.
[10] Jones, 'Brokers of Heritage', p. 237.
[11] *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Verse*, ed. by John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright (London: Faber, 1965); *The Penguin Book of British Poetry 1940-1965*, ed. by David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965); *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, ed. by Michael Roberts, revised by Donald Hall (London: Faber, 1936; Revised 1965).
[12] *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse*, ed. by Philip Larkin; *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, ed. by John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright; *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945-1980*, ed. by D.J. Enright; *The Faber Book of Modern* Verse, ed. by Michael Roberts, revised by Donald Hall; *British Poetry Since 1945*, ed. by Edward Lucie-Smith.
[13] Blake Morrison, 'Young Poets in the 1970s', in *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey* ed. by Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), p. 142.
[14] Jones, 'Brokers of Heritage', p. 199.
[15] *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, ed. by Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1998). *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, ed. by Sean O'Brien (London and Basingstoke: Picador, 1998).
[16] A. Alvarez, 'The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle' in, *The New Poetry*, ed. by A. Alvarez. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; Revised edition1966).

[17] Morrison, in Schmidt, p. 146.
[18] Eric Mottram, in *The New British Poetry 1968-1988*, ed. by Gillian Allnutt et al, (London: Paladin, 1988), p. 131. *Poetry Now*, ed. by G.S. Fraser, (London: Faber, 1956).
[19] Andrew Crozier, in Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, (eds.). *A Various Art*. (London: Paladin, 1990), p. 12.
[20] Peter Porter, quoted in James Keery, 'Nature, Flowers and the Night Sky: A Review of *A Various Art*', *Bete Noir*, 8/9, Autumn 1989/Spring 1990, 44-52, p. 51.
[21] Peter Forbes, 'A Struggle for Survival', *Independent*, 5 November 1988, Weekend p.33.
[22] Don Paterson, 'When poets flock together and go all obscure, it takes a good reader to tell the ..er...sheep from the goats', *Observer*, 28 July 1996, Review p.16.
[23] Romana Huk, in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by James Acheson and Romana Huk, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 8.
[24] Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice', in *Critical Quarterly*, 36.3 (1994), 34-52, (pp. 34-35).
[25] Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling Into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 41-60, (p. 56). D. S. Marriott, 'The Rites of Difficulty', in *Fragmente: A Magazine of Contemporary Poetics* 7 (1997), 118-137, (p. 135).
[26] Roy Fisher, p. 108.

Chapter One: The Orthodoxy

In this chapter I will discuss three anthologies: Robert Conquest's *New Lines*; A. Alvarez' *The New Poetry*; and Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*.[1] I will be concerned to examine the way in which critics have identified the role of these anthologies in the construction of what has been described as the 'narrow orthodoxy' of post-war British poetry. In particular, my discussion of these anthologies will draw on Andrew Crozier's important article, 'Thrills and frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism'.[2] Crozier traces the arguments through which Conquest in *New Lines* and Alvarez in *The New Poetry*, establish Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes as the canonical poets for the period 1945-1970. The significance of Crozier's article, however, lies in his assertion that, 'for all the differences and disagreements implied by those arguments, certain basic, undeclared – even unrecognized – agreements bound the controversialists together' (p. 221). As I will demonstrate later in this chapter the agreements Crozier identifies as binding Conquest and Alvarez together (and, I will suggest, which also bind in Morrison and Motion) are fundamental to what I am describing as the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry. They are fundamental because they describe what has become known as the dominant Movement poetic.

Published in 1956, *New Lines,* is recognised as the anthology in which 'Movement poetry [...] gathered the weight of group identity'.[3] Much has been written about the Movement, and in Blake Morrison's *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*[4] it has its definitive history. Morrison argues that protestations such as Conquest's own in the introduction to *New Lines* that his chosen 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 programme and rules' (p. xv), are misleading: 'these disclaimers cannot lightly be dismissed, but they should be treated with scepticism [...]. The view that the Movement was a journalistic invention or agreed fiction can no longer be allowed to stand' (pp. 5-6). Morrison goes on to indicate the significance of accepting the view that there was a Movement consensus by arguing that 'it was a literary group of considerable importance - probably the most influential since

the Imagists' (p. 6). And, in a significant broadening out of his argument, that I will demonstrate later in the chapter agrees with Andrew Crozier's analysis, he concludes that it is possible to conceive of the Movement as a description of an entire approach to poetry rather than simply as a list of designated writers:

> There has also been a tendency, increased of late, to use the term 'Movement' as an adjective as well as a noun: critics not only speak of 'the Movement', a specific 1950s group, but identify a 'Movement tone', or 'Movement manner' in texts not necessarily written in the 1950s. The identity of the Movement has, it seems, transcended both the group and the decade, coming to stand for certain characteristics in English writing - rationalism, realism, empiricism - which continue to exert an influence today. (p. 9)

As Morrison's definition of the Movement as 'coming to stand for certain characteristics in English writing – rationalism, realism, empiricism' suggests, the Movement was a post-war reaction against international modernism. Donald Davie, the Movement's pre-eminent poet/critic, defined it in a retrospective as a campaign to get 'back to basics':

> That reality was post-war [...] It was a matter of 'picking up the pieces'. What I and my friends of those days took for granted was that the Second World War had invalidated even those radically diminished principles and sentiments that had survived the war of 1914-18. In poetics the assumptions of the 1920s and 1930s had to be questioned [...] We had to go back to basics.[5]

As Morrison describes it: '[The Movement] believed that the "1914" generation - Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Yeats, Lawrence - had openly, or by implication, assisted the development of Fascism. Pound in particular was attacked' (p. 91). This aversion to modernism extended beyond Pound and his contempories to the poetic generation immediately preceding the Movement, the poets of the 1940s.

The poetry of the 1940s tends to be referred to through anthologies such as *The White Horseman: Prose and Verse of the New Apocalypse*[6] edited by J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece. The most prominent of these 'New Apocalyptics', apart from the editors, were G.S. Fraser, Nicholas Moore, Tom Scott, and Vernon Watkins. Other prominent 1940s poets included George Barker, David Gascoyne, Kathleen Raine, and most notably Dylan Thomas. John Press, in his survey of modern English poetry, argues that:

> They were all affected by the doctrines and techniques of surrealism; they all believed that poetry was not primarily concerned with man in society, political aspirations or social commentary, but with the celebration of spiritual truth; all were romantic visionaries, whose view of the world was ritualistic and religious [...] Their employment of myth and symbol, drawn from a wide variety of sources, often esoteric and recondite, was designed to emphazise the sacred character of poetry and to stress the fact that the poet is not a lawgiver, a moralist, a teacher or an entertainer, but a bard and a seer. The tone of their verse was appropriately elevated and incantatory, as they proclaimed the sacred mysteries of vatic poetry.[7]

The modernist, disjunctive, procedures of Surrealism, and the romantic stance of the vatic seer, were anathema to the Movement sensibility. Morrison argues that the anti-modernist stance of the Movement was also an anti-romanticism. According to him they saw modernism as inheriting the attitudes of romanticism rather than vanquishing them: 'Modernism was a development out of, rather than a departure from, Romanticism, and [...] Romantic assumptions about poetry had not only survived Hulme and Eliot, but had during the 1930s and 1940s actually been strengthened' (p. 155). In terms of poetry, 'getting back to basics' meant looking back beyond the poets of the 1940s and the modernist generation. These poets, Morrison suggests, had for the Movement come close to destroying the English poetic tradition. However, Morrison concludes, 'just as there were survivors of the Great War, so there certain English poets – Hardy and Graves, for example – who had "survived" the coming of Modernism, and whose work, it was thought, might provide a line back to pre-Modernist literature' (p. 203). Back to basics meant back to Hardy.

Consequently, Robert Conquest's introduction to *New Lines* offers a trenchant differentiation of the poets of the 1950s from the poets writing in the 1940s: 'In the 1940s the mistake was made of giving the Id, a sound player on the percussion side under a strict conductor, too much of a say in the doings of the orchestra as a whole [...] In this indiscriminating atmosphere other types of vicious taste, too, began to be catered for. The debilitating theory that poetry must be metaphorical gained wide acceptance' (pp. xi-xii). In contrast to the excessive use of metaphor of the previous generation, Conquest declares that the poets collected in *New Lines* represent the beginning of a new era, the

'restoration of a sound and fruitful attitude to poetry, of the principle that poetry is written by and for the whole man, intellect, emotions, senses and all' (p. xiv).

Conquest brings together nine poets in *New Lines*. These, including himself are: Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, Kingsley Amis, D.J. Enright, Donald Davie, and John Wain. Of these nine poets it can be argued that Larkin most exactly exemplifies Conquest's empiricist programme, a fact that explains Larkin's pre-eminence among Movement poets . His is a poetry suspicious of abstraction, and acutely reverent towards the facticity of the 'real', as a quotation from Larkin's 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', included by Conquest in *New Lines*, illustrates:

> But O, photography! as no art is,
> Faithful and disappointing! that records
> Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
> And will not censor blemishes
> Like washing-lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards.
> But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades
> A chin as doubled when it is, what grace
> Your candour thus confers upon her face!
> How overwhelmingly persuades
> That this is a real girl in a real place,
>
> In every sense empirically true! (pp. 28-29)

These lines, which call for a poetry derived from the example of photography (empiricist) and not from works of the imagination (abstract/metaphoric), could be a verse statement of Conquest's prose manifesto, and suggest the ease with which it has been possible to identify Larkin's poetry as the representative body of work to have emerged from the 1950's. Certainly by the time of the publication of *The New Poetry* in 1962 it was Larkin's reputation against which the new direction was to be plotted: Hughes's 'A Dream of Horses' championed over Larkin's 'At Grass'.

In his introductory essay Alvarez claims that Movement poetry is the latest in a line of English poetries in which 'the concept of gentility [...] reigns supreme' (p. 25). Whereas, Alvarez argues, the twentieth century has been dominated by a historical process whereby 'we are gradually being made to realise that all our lives [...] are influenced profoundly by forces which have nothing to do with

gentility, decency or politeness [...] forces of disintegration which destroy the old order of civilization' (p. 26), Movement poetry remains committed to the notion 'that life in England goes on much as it always has' (p. 25). In the face of social crisis and psychic disintegration Movement poetry adopts a stance which occludes discontinuity with the past, as summed up, Alvarez suggests, by a moment at the beginning of Larkin's 'Church Going': 'Hatless, I take off/ My cycle-clips in awkward reverence' (p.24). This encapsulates the gentility principle. Despite the radical sundering of any community between past and present produced by the speaker's agnosticism, the poem succeeds in papering over the cracks of such a split through the polite decency of the removal of cycle-clips. Although the moment is one of awkward reverence, the force of the church's atmosphere, 'its blent air',[8] to inspire the speaker to an act of piety, suggests a resurrection of community with the past. The implication of the poem is that, while the over-arching systems of signification of the past may have been eroded by the forces of disintegration of the twentieth century, apparently banal acts of politeness or decency can signify a continuity of feeling with the past unbroken by the processes of history.

For Alvarez such a negation of historical dislocation is a scandalous betrayal of the true task of the poet, which is a commitment exemplified by 'the great moderns', to 'open poetry up to new areas of experience' (p.21), and, precisely not, the timid reasonableness of Movement verse. For poetry to flourish it must 'drop the pretence that life, give or take a few social distinctions, is the same as ever, that gentility, decency and all the other social totems will eventually muddle through' (pp. 27-28). Reacting to the Movement's 'back to basics' campaign, Alvarez argues that the characteristic 'gentility' of the poetry of the 1950s is an example of the latest in a series of 'negative feed-backs' in English poetry:

> Sometime in the twenties Thomas Hardy remarked to Robert Graves that "vers libre could come to nothing in England. 'All we can do is to write on the old themes in the old styles, but try to do a little better than those who went before us.'" Since about 1930 the machinery of modern English poetry seems to have been controlled by a series of negative feed-backs designed to produce precisely the effect Hardy wanted. (p. 21)

Alvarez's argues that 'the disease so often found in English culture: gentility' (p. 32) can be cured if these 'negative feed-backs' are circumvented by following the example of two American poets, Robert Lowell and John Berryman, who have learnt from the moderns 'to write poetry of immense skill and intelligence which cope[s] openly with the quick of their experience, experience sometimes on the edge of disintegration and breakdown' (pp. 28-29). The work of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton was added to the example of Berryman and Lowell in the 1965 second edition of the anthology on the grounds that 'their work, more than anyone else's, makes sense of my [Alvarez's] introduction' (p. 18).

As it was in the case of Larkin, where it could be said that the closeness of the poet's practice to the critics pronouncements secured for him the pre-eminence of representative status, so it can be argued that the foregrounding of Hughes over the other poets collected in *The New Poetry* is due to the apparent exactitude with which his work seems to put into practice Alvarez's poetic programme. Certainly, Hughes represents a violent contrast to the work of Movement poets. Whereas Movement verse calls for a poetry of negation, the denial of intense feelings associated with the experience of psychic and social disintegration, Hughes seems openly to embrace them. Donald Davie, for example, in a representative Movement lyric, insists that the only valid response to the reality of the nuclear age is to remain numb to the potential embodied in atomic weapons for mass destruction - that the only safeguard against nuclear holocaust is to ensure that one does not allow oneself to feel too intensely the plight of humankind post-Hiroshima, since it is the human capacity to feel intensely, and not the technological capability to destroy on a vast scale, that is the threat to existence:

> 'Alas, alas who's injured by my love?'
> And recent history replies: Half Japan!
> Not love, but hate? Well, both are versions of
> The 'feeling' that you dare me to...Be dumb!
> Appear only concerned to make it scan!
> How dare we now be anything but numb?[9]

By contrast, Hughes's poem 'A Woman Unconscious', included by Alvarez in *The New Poetry*, dares to engage with the potential horror of apocalyptic conflict as 'Russia and America circle each other' in the grip of the Cold War. It

succeeds in translating the tropes of mutually-assured destruction, 'Threats nudge an act that were without doubt/ A melting of the mould in the mother,/ Stones melting about the root.// The quick of the earth burned out', from the epic scale to a moment of intense lyric feeling, the contemplation of the loss of an individual life:

> And though bomb be matched against bomb,
> Though all mankind wince out and nothing endure-
> Earth gone in an instant flare-
> Did a lesser death come
> Onto the white hospital bed
> Where one, numb beyond her last of sense,
> Closed her eyes on the world's evidence
> And into pillows sunk her head. (p. 177)

Hughes's refusal to limit the breadth of his poetic vision, and his refusal to restrict his vocabulary to the decencies of Movement diction, single him out as the leading innovator of the post-1950's generation of poets.

As it was against the reputation of Larkin that Alvarez set out his stall in *The New Poetry*, so it is against the reputation of Hughes, as representative poet of his generation, that Morrison and Motion define the territory that they map out in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*:

> Our anthology cannot help but be very conscious of Alvarez's: it was enormously influential and its fighting introduction - the attack on "gentility" and the advocation of the risk-taking poetry of two Americans [...] and one Englishman - is rightly famous. But it has become a historical document. The [...] Americans are dead; Ted Hughes is a remarkable writer but no longer the presiding spirit of British poetry; and Alvarez's insistence that 'the forces of disintegration' be represented in poetry, not hushed up by English decency, has come to seem simplistic. (p. 13)

As Larkin and Hughes came to represent what was distinctive about the poetry of their respective generations, so Morrison and Motion seek to define what distinguishes the poetry collected in their anthology around the name of a single poet, that of Seamus Heaney:

> The most important poet of the last fifteen years [...] Heaney is someone Alvarez could not foresee at the time [of *The New Poetry*] and someone he has attacked since. On the face of it, Alvarez's hostility to Heaney's work might seem merely wilful. In fact it is entirely consistent with the attitudes adopted in *The*

> *New Poetry*. Alvarez praised Lowell, Hughes, et al. for dealing with their experience 'nakedly', and he presented language as a mere instrument in a therapeutic transaction between writer and reader. Heaney is characteristically more oblique; and he delights in language, relishing it [...] as something that embodies politics, history and locality, as well as having its own delectability. (p. 13)

Certainly Morrison and Motion's claims for Heaney have a ring of truth about them. Heaney clearly rejects the 'confessional' model that is suggested by the example of Lowell and Berryman. As Morrison and Motion point out, for example, Heaney's 'Bog Poems', 'refract the experience of the contemporary Irish Troubles through the sufferings of a previous Northern civlization and its sacrificial victims' (pp. 13-14), and are therefore distanced from Alvarez's call to 'walk naked' among the events of contemporary social crisis.

However, despite the cultivation of the appearance of diversity in the delineation of the canonical triumvirate of Larkin, Hughes, and Heaney proposed by these anthologies, the controversy self-consciously staged between them by their respective editors conceals an underlying homogeneity. As Andrew Crozier suggests, there exists a fundamental structural similarity between the poetry of Conquest and Alvarez's anthologies: 'Alvarez's special pleading [for the virtues of 'confessional' poetry] should not obscure the fact that he shares a broad agreement with Conquest about the proper mode of discourse of poetry' (p. 217). Crozier illustrates his argument by analyzing the two poems that Alvarez chose to indicate the superiority of Hughes's work to that of Larkin's: Larkin's 'At Grass' and Hughes's 'A Dream of Horses'. Alvarez argued that 'At Grass' 'is a nostalgic re-creation of the Platonic (or New Yorker) idea of the English scene, part pastoral, part sporting [...] It is more skilful but less urgent than "A Dream of Horses"'. It is the immediacy of the Hughes poem that Alvarez praises: 'A Dream of Horses' is 'unquestionably *about* something; it is a serious attempt to re-create and so clarify, unfalsified and in the strongest imaginative terms possible, a powerful complex of emotions and sensations. Unlike Larkin's, Hughes's horses have a violent, impending presence' (p. 31). At the level of surface description Alvarez's comments are apt. 'At Grass' is nostalgic for a certain kind of imagined rural scene:

> The eye can hardly pick them out

> From the cold shade they shelter in,
> Till wind distress tail and mane;
> Then one crops grass, and moves about
> The other seeming to look on –
> And stands anonymous again. (pp. 29-30)

The poem also regrets the passing of the splendour of 'classic Junes', and it is true that this sepia tinged reminiscence is in marked contrast with the 'impending presence' of Hughes's horses:

> And we ran out, mice in our pockets and straw in our hair,
> Into darkness that was avalanching to horses
> And a quake of hooves. Our lantern's little orange flare.
>
> Made a round mask of our each sleep-dazed face,
> Bodiless, or else bodies by horses
> That whinnied and bit and cannoned the world from its place.
> The tall palace was so white, the moon was so round,
> Everything else this plunging of horses
> To the rim of our eyes that strove for the shapes of the sound.
> (pp. 30-31)

But Alvarez elides the fact that Hughes's poem is also nostalgic. It is constructed around the contrast between the plenitude of the thundering hooves of the dream-horses and the reality of the quotidian beasts over which the grooms are entrusted with their daily care:

> We awoke stiff; broad day had come.
> Out through the gate the unprinted desert stretched
> To stone and scorpion; our stable-horses
> Lay in their straw, in a hag-sweat, listless and wretched.
> Now let us, tied, be quartered by these poor horses,
> If but doomsday's flames be great horses,
> The forever itself a circling of the hooves of horses. (pp. 30-31)

Both poems, Crozier points out, 'are allegories of an absent fullness of being' (p. 217). The fundamental similarity between them is the way both poets use figurative language to impose what Crozier describes as a 'nostalgia for diminished being' (p. 218) upon lived experience:

> Both poems, as allegories, ask to be read not for their presentational immediacy but for what they say about life. What differentiates the poems is their approach to the nostalgia of diminished being [...] Larkin suggests that although we may experience such feelings we should not allow ourselves to be too affected by them, whereas Hughes, I take it, suggests that we can

> imagine or dream ourselves out of them. Neither poet questions the sources or conditions of such feelings, but takes them for granted. (p. 218)

This comparison of 'At Grass' and 'A Dream of Horses' illustrates that there is a great deal more in common between *New Lines* and *The New Poetry* than the fractious debate between Conquest and Alvarez suggests. Indeed, the core of the dispute is, as Crozier has pointed out, merely a matter of 'ideological preferences among self-images' (p. 217). Conquest prefers a certain diffidence of style to Alvarez's taste for brash self-assertion, he displays a predilection for the ironic regrets of a Larkin poem as against the show of violent anguish found in Hughes. The significance of this claim is that it enables Crozier to propose a definition of the poetic discourse shared by Larkin and Hughes. It is a discourse 'which operates through the personal lyric [...] and employs an elaborate figurative language to draw together the self and its objects' (p.217): a mode within which 'nostalgia is [...] fully naturalized' (p. 218). Furthermore, Crozier's implication is that Alvarez's claim in his introduction that the new poetry embraces the experiments of 'the great moderns' can only be superficially true. Instead, Crozier suggests, *New Lines* and *The New Poetry* clarify an emerging dominant poetic discourse that is explicitly anti-modernist.

This discourse, I suggest, can also be said to prevail in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. As I have shown, Morrison and Motion argue that Seamus Heaney is the representative poet of their anthology. However, despite their best attempts to distance Heaney's work from the precepts of Conquest and Alvarez, it can be shown to share the characteristic observed by Crozier in Larkin and Hughes of employing figurative language to draw together the self and its objects into a relationship within which nostalgia is fully naturalized:

> Rain comes down through the alders,
> Its low conducive voices
> Mutter about let-downs and erosions
> And yet each drop recalls
>
> The diamond absolutes.
> I am neither internee nor informer;
> An inner émigré, grown long-haired
> And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks
For their meagre heat, have missed
The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
The comet's pulsing rose. (p. 32)

These lines from Heaney's 'Exposure' substantiate Crozier's assertion that nostalgia is fully naturalized within the dominant discourse. The pathetic fallacy of the rain's mutterings about 'let-downs and erosions' is used to naturalize the poet's disappointment in the last stanza. The implication that the wood-kerne's impoverished fire is a metaphor of poetry circumscribes the possibilities of the poetic itself to such disappointment. The 'meagre heat' of poetry bears the same denuded relationship to the full-presence of the 'comet's pulsing rose' as do raindrops to 'diamond absolutes'. Such fatalistic regret deflects the reader's attention away from the source of the poet's despair, the Irish Troubles, which are gestured towards by the mention of internees and informers, but then brushed aside by the casting of the poet as innocent peasant 'Escaped from the massacre'. Such feelings, the poem suggests, are inevitable and not the consequence of particular historical and political conditions.

Significantly, however, 'Exposure' occupies a crucial place in Heaney's understanding of the function of the poetic. It is a key text for Heaney because it contrasts his own vocation as poet with the life choices of friends who have led lives of commitment, of engagement with, the Irish Troubles, as the first half of the poem makes clear:

It is December in Wicklow:
Alders dripping, birches
Inheriting the last light,
The ash tree cold to look at.

A comet that was lost
Should be visible at sunset,
Those million tons of light
Like a glimmer of haws and rose-hips,

And I sometimes see a falling star.
If I could come on meteorite!

Instead I walk through damp leaves,
Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,

Imagining a hero
On some muddy compound
His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the desperate.

How did I end up like this?
I often think of my friends'
Beautiful prismatic counselling
And the anvil brains of some who hate me

As I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible *tristia*.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs? (pp. 31-32)

In 1995 Heaney received the Nobel Prize for Poetry, an act that symbolically confirmed his position as *the* canonical poet of the post-war period. In his Nobel Lecture 'Crediting Poetry', Heaney contextualises the poem, recalling how during the mid-nineteen-seventies he found himself living in County Wicklow, listening to news reports of the Troubles:

> Feeling puny in my predicaments [...] feeling challenged yet steadfast in my non-combatant status [...] What I was longing for was not quite stability but an active escape from the quicksand of relativism, a way of crediting poetry without anxiety or apology.[10]

The success of 'Exposure', Heaney claims, is that it achieves an 'order true to the impact of external reality and [...] sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being' (p. 454). That is to say, from the nostalgia of diminished being described in 'Exposure' itself, the act of making poetry for Heaney is sufficient to achieve a victory over the diminishments of experience. As Neil Corcoran has put it in a slightly different context that I will return to in Chapter Four, 'a subdued human passivity registers its diminishments, accepting them by apparently overcoming them in the scene of writing'.[11]

Clair Wills in *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* reads Heaney's work precisely through the historical specificity of its relationship with the pressures placed upon Northern Irish artists to engage with the political situation in Northern Ireland as it has developed since 1968. She

argues that the dominant critical reception of Heaney's work has been an effort to present the lyric as a space of artistic freedom which transcends the political turmoil that surrounds it. The problem that [12]besets readings of Heaney's work in relation to the political situation in Northern Ireland, and the problem more generally with accounts of the relationship between art and politics in the Northern Irish situation, is 'the notion that art has a "redemptive" role because it offers a "resolution" of political difficulties in the realm of aesthetics' (p. 9).

What I am interested in here is the way in which Heaney's art is said to have a redemptive effect. Mark Lawson, a respected Arts journalist and critic of popular culture, comments on Heaney's stance towards 'the Troubles' that '[his] best defence of his reticence on public matters is that he has always been a poet of the private'. Wills argues that it is precisely through this persona of privacy that Heaney's work has been read as mediating the political conflict, universalising it as 'Art'. She argues that characteristically in discussions of Northern Irish poetry the privacy of the lyric self is also associated with more communal concerns. Fintan O'Toole, in a representative assessment prior to the publication of the first post-Nobel volume, has commented that this is true of Heaney's work, which combines 'an immense natural talent' with 'a specific response to the condition of Northern Ireland':

> What Seamus Heaney has done is to make metaphors in which the reality of living in a divided world, being caught between opposing loyalties, is transformed from a curse into a blessing. Instead of remaining forever stuck on a borderline between Ireland and England, Protestant and Catholic, he has imagined for himself a different kind of border between the mundane and the marvellous and pitched his poetic tent on it. He has made space for himself on what he calls 'the frontier of writing', the line that divides life from art, reality from invention [...] He has been faithful to his own divided place and his own confused culture, yet managed to make at least in art, something whole and clear from the division and the confusion.[13]

O'Toole's discussion of the achievement of Heaney's work provides an instance of what Wills has described as the paradigmatic move in critical accounts of Northern Irish Poetry. She argues that the need for a poetic responsibility towards the political situation is said to be met by, 'the poet's ability to open the privacy of the lyric to more communal concerns' (p. 198). As

O'Toole's remarks about Heaney's 'immense natural talent' and his ability to make something 'whole and clear' at the level of art suggest, this opening of the personal towards the communal depends upon romantic assumptions of poetic inspiration. Wills points out that 'this process depends on a notion of representativeness which in turn derives from the romantic ideal of poetic authenticity and personal sincerity, which enables the poet to find a voice beyond his or her individual concerns' (p. 198). The key point here is the way in which the 'I' of a Heaney poem through its private meditation upon experience is able to cleanse that experience of its tainted associations with the politics of Northern Ireland.

The mechanism by which Heaney's poetry achieves this act of cleansing is extremely interesting. The meditative private lyric self is able to transcend the realm of politics because of its ability to draw upon the romantic ideology of the authenticity of the poetic experience. This cleansed 'authentic' experience is then able to be translated from the private realm to the communal through the associated romantic notion of the poet as the voice of the people.

This discussion of Heaney is pertinent because it makes clear the fact that the lyric mode of Heaney's poetry, the dominant mode in contemporary poetry, is a Romantic category. As Annabel Patterson points out, the view of the lyric derived from the symbolist and modernist theories of Eliot and Stevens 'as an intense, imaginative form of self-expression or self-consciousness, the most private of all genres, is, of course, a belief derived from Romanticism'.[14]

Wills's account enables an explanation to be offered as to the reasons for Heaney's prominent position within constructions of the contemporary British canon. This can be explained by the appeal of the romantic lyric self transcending political division. Heaney's poetry has a certain glamour of association with 'the Troubles' but any difficult political questions are resolved by the sweetness of his lyric voice. As Rebecca O'Rourke has commented on the dominant poetic tradition's self-image, 'Poetry often presents itself as being above politics – unless [...] [it is] done so utterly beautifully, like Seamus Heaney on Ireland'.[15]

The allure of the romantic lyric self is powerful. This is partly a matter of literary history, as Annabel Patterson has pointed out the understanding of the lyric self that is derived from symbolist and modernist theories is thoroughly romantic. Furthermore, as Jonathan Culler and Paul de Man have suggested, the powerful presence of the speaking voice in lyric poetry provides its key to intelligibility. Culler argues that, 'The fundamental aspect of lyric writing [...] is to produce an apparently phenomenal world through the figure of the voice'.[16] De Man has extended this analysis to argue that, 'the principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the lyric voice (which is) the aesthetic presence that determines the hermeneutics of the lyric'.[17] However, as Edward Larrissy has argued, this thoroughly romantic infatuation with the lyric self encodes a precisely imaginary (in the Lacanian sense) subject position.[18] The lyric self offers an imaginary resolution in the aesthetic realm to the contradictions of lived experience. It is not surprising, given its compensatory powers, that the lyric mode has reigned supreme from Wordsworth to Heaney. However, while during the romantic period the imaginative power of the lyric self was registered through the confident strains of the Wordsworthian 'egotistical sublime', the contemporary lyric is much constrained and exhibits (as I have argued) what Andrew Crozier has described as the 'nostalgia of diminished being'.[19] That is to say that the lyric self no longer bestrides the stage replete in its own certainty, sovereign of all it surveys, but rather represents the last retreat of a subjectivity assailed on all sides by a recognition of its own impotency, and surrendering agency in the world to the imaginary compensations of aesthetic resolution. Burton Hatlen has described this condition in an account of the contemporary lyric, which he describes as 'the invocation of a series of sensory images that claim to encode universal human feelings':

> This gesture is Romantic in that it locates the unifying personal consciousness at the center of the phenomenal world [...] the final outcome of this Romantic aesthetic [is] a poetry almost entirely controlled by the first person pronoun, which claims to name the one fixed point in an unstable world - a poetry, therefore of nostalgia, for in the end it turns out that in such poems the self is constituted largely by its longing for a lost homeland'.[20]

Concluding his discussion of *New Lines*, *The New Poetry*, and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, Crozier offers a definition and critique of what he terms the dominant poetic tradition:

> In the poetic tradition now dominant the authoritative self, discoursing in a world of banal, empirically derived objects and relations, depends on its employment of metaphor and simile for poetic vitality. These figures are conceptually subordinate to the empirical reality of self and objects, yet they constitute the nature of the poem. Poets are now praised above all else as the inventors of figures - as rhetoricians, in fact - with a consequent narrowing of our range of appropriate response. Poetry has been turned into a reserve for small verbal thrills, a daring little frill around the hem of normal discourse; objects and relations in the natural and social worlds have an unresistant, token presence; at its most extreme, they serve as pretexts for bravura display. (pp. 229-30)

I will return to a detailed analysis of Crozier's reading of mainstream poetics in Chapters Four and Chapter Five. For the moment, however, I want to note how underpinning Crozier's excellent analysis of the dominant poetic is the long standing animosity of the literary dispute between traditionalists and modernists I refer to in the Introduction as the 'ancient family row'. It is a dispute that has a long and bitter history, as in the notorious episode of the struggle for editorial control of *Poetry Review* during the 1970s.

At the beginning of the 1970s, *Poetry Review* was the dominant establishment small magazine. It had been established in 1909 under the editorship of Harold Munro as the journal of the Poetry Society and it was still of considerable importance. The story of the struggle for editorial control is usefully summarised by Roger Ellis:

> In 1969 *Poetry Review*'s editor, Derek Parker, chose to feature the work of a number of avant-garde/experimental post-war UK modernists and in 1970 some of these (Allen Fisher, Lee Harwood, Peter Hodgkiss, Pete Morgan, Tom Pickard, Elaine Randell, Ken Smith and Barry MacSweeney) were elected to the [Poetry] society's general council, Hugh MacDiarmid and Basil Bunting to the presidency and Eric Mottram took over the editing of *Poetry Review* from Parker. Mottram set about to deliberately transform it from 'a mansion of grandmotherly amateurism into the outpost of American and European modernism'. To do this, however, he had to upset the sensibilities of a number of Poetry Society luminaries [...] Charles Osborne of the Arts Council was called in to restore a 'balance' and in a heated public meeting in 1974 the Arts Council assumed effective control of the Poetry

> Society; subsequently, Mottram was squeezed out of the editorship of *Poetry Review*.[21]

Ellis justifiably remarks that this extraordinary struggle has 'had long-lasting repercussions' and has 'injected a degree of rancour' into this major faultline in contemporary British poetry (p. 84).

I mention this episode because the 'rancour' Ellis describes it as having injected into the discussion of contemporary British poetry is important to understand as the critique offered by Crozier of the dominant tradition becomes hardened in the polemics of other critics. This hardening of attitudes can further be understood when it is considered how mainstream critics have written the history of post-war British poetry to the exclusion of work from the experimental – modernist tradition.

An example of such a mainstream history is Neil Corcoran's *English Poetry Since 1940*, which makes passing reference to the work of British modernists but only to more firmly segregate their experiments with form from the more central currents of contemporary British poetry.[22]

Corcoran sub-titles the first section of his book '(Dis)continuities and (Dis)placements After Modernism' and uses the careers of T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden to effectively draw a line under the disjunctions of modernism. Citing the example of 'The Shield of Achilles' as exemplary of his later work Corcoran comments that 'Auden's abandonment of Modernist obliquity and hermeticism reaps one of its richest rewards'. Corcoran goes on to suggest that the achievement of Auden's later work, particularly in the way in which it revises modernist procedures, has had an important pedagogical influence upon succeeding generations of British poets:

> Auden in his later work wilfully insists on a discursive model of pre-Modernist, even Augustan formal and technical civility, accompanied by a startlingly mechanistic theory of poetry as 'contraption' [...] Auden revels in the impurities of lexical variety, arcana and neologism, and reverses all symbolist principle by revising himself in public, attempting to make his earlier work proteanly coincident with his later beliefs, regarding poetry as an element of honest behaviour [...] The various recensions of the Auden minatory have been deeply influential on the subsequent course of British poetry: in a line traceable most notably through Roy Fuller, Peter Porter, James Fenton, and Tom Paulin we can

> follow its persistence. On these poets among numerous others, different kinds of Auden example have also been provocative and enabling: the technical variety; the capacious social inclusiveness; the view of poetry as a discourse that must make its way among other competing discourses, without any assumption of privileged or quasi-sacerdotal status. The anti-modernism implicit in such examples has set one definite course for English poetry in the post-war period. (pp. 3-4 and pp. 12-13)

Corcoran's equation here of a modernist poetics with an 'assumption of privileged or quasi-sacerdotal status' is significant because he sees this sort of value claim as annulling itself in Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'In the *Quartets* Eliot brings Modernist free verse and Mallarmean symbolism to their ultimate pitch in English writing, even in the act of chastising their inadequacy [...] *Four Quartets* becomes thereby a poem in which the high Modernist moment of writing in English apologises for and reduces itself' (pp. 3-6). This means that for Corcoran 'In the post-symbolist poetics of the post-war period the longing for the pure, uncluttered space of the symbolist modes of transcendence finds its opportunity, if also its humbling correction, permanently lodged in *Four Quartets*' (p13).

Corcoran sees an interest in Eliot's symbolist modes, and salutory lessons having been learnt, in the work of Geoffrey Hill ('The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy'), Donald Davie ('Three for Water Music'), and in Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island'. On the other hand, Corcoran points out, Eliot's Anglicanism as it is registered in *Four Quartets* has had an important influence in redirecting post-war British poets away from the example of modernism:

> The megalopolitan and European-cosmopolitan genesis of high Modernism could hardly have undergone a stranger metamorphosis: the deracination of a waste land is supplanted by the chthonic rootedness that is now and England, beginning and end, 'nourishing the corn'. The poem's patriotism is therefore the enemy of Eliot's early symbolist manner: it insists on acknowledgements and recognitions, on decorums of public tact and accountability, which the *symboliste* hermeticisms, fragmentations and obliquities of *The Waste Land*, and of *The Hollow Men*, and *Ash-Wednesday*, where, it might be thought, almost designed to avoid [...] The poem's dream of English Anglicanism, with its culmination in the church building of 'Little Gidding', further writes itself, and, it may be, demolishes itself, in a large number of subsequent English poems, from the bewildered

> inquisitions of Stevie Smith's 'Oh Christianity, Christianity' through the awkward agnostic reverence of Philip Larkin's 'Church Going' to the secular vision of the church-as-theatre, with its 'tall tale of the cross', in Christopher Reid's 'Magnum Opus'.
> (pp. 5-13)

Corcoran, then, maps out three lines of development in British poetry since 1940 which have their origin in lessons learnt from the later careers of Auden and Eliot. Whether following the urbanity of Auden, or whether in imitation or reaction to Eliot's Anglicanism or chastened symbolism, this dominant tradition in post-war poetry draws a firm line under the experiments of modernism. As for Davie, Corcoran constructs Philip Larkin as the presiding (anti)genius of this anti-modernist canon: 'Thinking about Larkin's popularity and his Englishness is to think, above all, about the way the peculiarly mistrustful, unallied, 'less deceived' sensibility relates to and regards some of the rituals of English social and cultural life' (pp. 90-91). However, whereas Davie rather cautiously asserts the reluctant acceptance by would be modernist experimenters such as Roy Fisher, Charles Tomlinson, and J.H. Prynne, of the diminished horizons of Larkin's Hardyesque political quietism, Corcoran boldly asserts the assimilation of 'the "other" of literary Modernism' by a nativist tradition grounded in the particularities of British localities. Consequently David Jones and Basil Bunting, described as '[t]he two poets of the period who most radically pursued the technical experiments of high Modernism' (p. 26), become in Corcoran's account rather cranky antiquarians whose flirtations with modernist procedures, such as breadth of historical, mythological, and cross-cultural allusion, are contained by their respect for the solidities of Welsh and Northumbrian quiddities:

> Both Jones and Bunting, then, inscribe a conjunction quite exceptional in the poetry of the period [...]their poetry is the site of the fullest taking into native possession of the hitherto alien or suspect forms and effects of high Modernism, and the most belated possible renovation of that Modernism by its encounter with the genuinely other. The belatedness is intrinsic to the undertaking, and it registers as a tendency in both poets [...] to the mannered, pedantic and antiquarian. Nevertheless, the further making of it new has added extraordinary long poems to the language and has provided subsequent poets with models not necessarily so much of present technical use as of general hint and

> gesture, ways of proceeding through and beyond Modernism into a future which accommodates it with a difference. (p. 28)

It is significant that in listing poets who have been influenced by Jones or Bunting (Heaney, Montague, Middleton, and Hill by Jones and Davie and Gunn by Bunting) Corcoran fails to acknowledge the role played by poets within the small press and magazine community of the British Poetry Revival in working to recover the reputations of these two important poets. Also it is important that the work of Jones and Bunting is seen as the latest possible engagement with modernism and that the poets whom Corcoran sees as learning from them do so in a way that moves beyond modernism. Most interesting, however, is the strategy by which Corcoran explains this movement beyond modernism as having taken place. Corcoran's insistence upon their assimilation of the disquieting other of modernism to a nativist tradition is a function of their respective Welsh and Northumbrian groundedness, a groundedness which combines with their experiences of Palestine (Jones) and Persia (Bunting) to work through what has undoubtedly been one of the major developments in post-war British poetry, the eclipse of a monologic 'English' poetry by the emergent regional and post-colonial speech communities of post-Imperial Britain:

> The effortful and exceptional conjunctions in the texts of David Jones and Basil Bunting may be regarded, then, as exemplary in their preoccupation with what continue as major elements of our own history: the break-up of empire and the heritage of colonialism; the struggle towards a different perception of what has traditionally been considered a 'centre' and a 'periphery' in British political and cultural life; and the insistence on the strength and necessity of speaking, in modern English poetry, one's own resourceful dialect. Anti-universalist in their most intimate linguistic assumptions, *The Anathemata* and *Briggflatts* are native acknowledgements of the lesson preached by Salman Rushdie when he says that 'English, no longer an English language, now grows from many roots.' (p. 36)

It is of course ironic that this welcome acknowledgement of the pluralism of the heteroglossic wealth of contemporary speech communities should be made in the name of a restrictive monologic nativism hostile to certain formal choices in the construction of a poem. This tolerance of difference marked by Corcoran's acceptance of a variety of different speech communities as fit to carry the weight of the tradition of British poetry masks an ingrained hostility to other forms of

difference which is shared by the apparent inclusiveness of the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* and Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*.[23] The way in which a gesture of openness can be used to cover an act of exclusion is demonstrated by the cursory critical commentary Corcoran devotes to the work of the poets of the British Poetry Revival.

Agreeing with the account of the poetry of the poets of the British Poetry Revival that I have given above, Corcoran discusses their work as having been produced 'deliberately outside [of] the cultural "mainstream" and the commercial publishers of contemporary poetry' (p. 135). However, he rather too conveniently uses this as an excuse to avoid a detailed engagement with this work, seeing rather in its 'presence as a regional, extra- or anti-metropolitan' counter-voice how 'it brought to public attention a poetry self-consciously written from the British provinces, preparing the ground for some subsequent work which has become one of the strongest and most influential kinds in English writing since the 1960s' (pp. 135-136). However, the 'English writing' that the work of the poets of the British Poetry Revival were preparing the ground for, it turns out in Corcoran's account, was that of Seamus Heaney whose collections *Wintering Out* and *North* may 'be read as paradigms of the decisive shift in cultural consciousness after the 1960s' (p. 196).[24] Heaney becomes the index of wider cultural changes, and in a move that seems to lend objectivity to this critical account Corcoran cites the supporting views of Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in the introduction to their *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, which merely compounds the marginalisation of the poets of the British Poetry Revival:

> If the decentring impulse of Heaney's *Wintering Out* may be read as paradigmatic of the variations and deviations which I describe here, this was a significance recognised by one of the most prominent anthologies of the period, the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in 1982, in which Heaney is placed first and named as originary: 'the new spirit in British poetry began to make itself felt in Northern Ireland during the late 1960s and early 1970s'. (pp. 199-200)

I do not want to discount the significance or the importance of the work of Seamus Heaney, which is indeed central to the period. However, the

questionable way in which Corcoran uses a connection between Heaney's regionalism and the regionalism of for instance Tom Pickard and the Morden Tower poets in Newcastle, in order to conceal a continued tradition of modernist poetics within British poetry beneath the figure of Heaney, needs to be pointed out. The fact that Corcoran's neglect of this continuing tradition is a product not of ignorance but wilful oversight makes his account the more invidious. Aware that the Morrison and Motion anthology is controversial, he comments that 'The centrifugal spirit of the time may well be better realised by the Paladin anthology *The New British Poetry 1968-88* which required four editors working independently to tell four separate stories' (p. 200). But the stories told by Eric Mottram and Ken Edwards in the selections made for their sections of the anthology remain resolutely untold by Corcoran.

However, equally objectionable to the way in which Corcoran uses an apparent openness to regional variety in order to conceal a fundamental exclusion is the way in which this pattern is repeated through his delineation of a poetics beyond the legacy of modernism, in an appeal to what Morrison and Motion describe in their introduction as 'the spirit of post-modernism':

> Throughout this study I have attempted to define various attitudes to Modernism taken up by succeeding generations of British writers; and [...] I have used the term 'neo-Modern' to refer to a poetry self-consciously and even combatively parading a relationship to a particular kind of Modernist model, that associated with the Pound-Olson-Williams line of American poetry; despite its lack of currency, it still seems to me a useful term for this kind of 'writing after Modernism'. I also think, however, that the term 'postmodern' may be genuinely useful in defining a series of attributes shared by contemporary work which may be much less self-consciously or 'officially' indebted to or accommodating of, Modernism. (pp. 200-201)

Here Corcoran's apparent engagement with a post-Eliot modernist poetics, his so-called 'neo-Moderns', renders that poetic tradition impotent by condemning it to the cul-de-sac of 'writing after Modernism' whereas the way forward is taken by that poetry that avoids any contamination by the other of modernism by being conveniently postmodern. In another reductive argument similar to that in which Heaney is employed as an index of the decentring of the tradition of British poetry, Corcoran takes one aspect of Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of the

postmodern as axiomatic, and uses it to confirm that the poets anthologised by Morrison and Motion do indeed work within the spirit of postmodernism:

> What I have been describing already as the fragmentation of a purportedly once unified or organic tradition into separate and often mutually hostile variant kinds is, on one reading, itself the most profound feature of the postmodern: in Jean Francois Lyotard's influential *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) he posits the end of the 'master narrative' as the essential condition of the postmodern. The concept or construction of a 'national' literary tradition would be one such master narrative; and it seems clear that an essential spirit in contemporary writing is to write against any such totalisation, to disrupt it with other kinds of narrative: those of class, gender, ethnic origin, race and religion. The postmodern anti-essentialist critique of the depth model of identity and culture, and its alternative position that both are to be viewed in conditions of protean construction, as a play among signifiers, are reflected in several ways in contemporary poetry: in the preoccupation with surface in 'Martian' poetry [...] in the use of images of a British imperial past in Andrew Motion and James Fenton [...] in the temporal confusions or interminglings in Fenton; and in the temporal transparencies of Paul Muldoon. (pp 201-202)

Again, it is not that I want to necessarily dispute that these poets are in significant ways bound up with a negotiation with what can be described as the postmodern condition, but that the critical commentary too quickly and to unproblematically makes a radical break between modernism and postmodernism, a manoeuvre that too easily supposes that any poetry working within a modernist inheritance is consequently pursuing a dead-end.

Indeed, Corcoran's borrowing of the term 'neo-Modern' from Frank Kermode seems designed to box a contemporary modernist poetics into a corner.[25] The term is appropriated in order show how the work of Christopher Middleton, Roy Fisher, and J.H. Prynne can be differentiated from 'both the "Modernist" and the "postmodern", so that it may be made to indicate three essential characteristics: a turning against what these poets read as a played-out native humanist or empiricist tradition; a deliberate indebtedness to the work (poetic, critical and aesthetic) of Ezra Pound and, through him, of an American writing whose central figure is Charles Olson; and a readiness for an exploratory or experimental formal inventiveness not common in post-war British poetry' (p. 164). This

strategy proves highly successful in Corcoran's historical survey of contemporary British poetry since 1970 as I have suggested above. However, the task seems almost superfluous since Corcoran is able in any case, in a move that takes its example from Davie, to assimilate any disturbing formal inventiveness to a solidly nativist frame of reference. As with Davie, Corcoran's historical narrative performs this task of recuperation in relation to the work of Charles Tomlinson, Roy Fisher, and J.H. Prynne.

Corcoran's analysis of Tomlinson's work proceeds with an ingrained hostility towards his techniques based upon a rejection of Tomlinson's earlier indictment of Movement practises, which Corcoran dismisses as the 'irritating condescension' [with which] he has berated much contemporary English poetry for its small-mindedness and defeatism' (p. 104). However, Tomlinson's appeal to 'American mentors', and in particular to William Carlos Williams and his development of the 'triadic foot', is swiftly brought within the ambit of the Hardyesque: '[Williams's] forms as Tomlinson derives and develops them do bring a novel delicacy, tact and gracefulness into English poetry [...] they do so in a way that brings Williams into a nodding acquaintance with Hardy' (pp. 104-105). Corcoran's account here seems suffused with the pique shared by Davie in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* when he remarks of an American reviewer's suggestion in *The Southern Review* that Tomlinson might have learnt something from Williams that 'it is encouraging for the countrymen of Chaucer to realize that from the standpoint of Albuquerque they have just made a beginning, or rather have had it made for them'. (THBP p183)[26] Fortunately, however, Tomlinson's ingrained nativism is such that the wild miasma of the Williams verse line is contained by the probity of Tomlinson's Englishness: 'In contrast to the flaccidity and inertia of so much modern verse deriving from the Williams line, such poems of Tomlinson's reveal the strength of a full absorption by an English poet of some of the most energising elements in the Williams poetic' (p. 105).

In fact, poets working within the modernist tradition have been extremely active in the post-war period. Although the *Poetry Review* affair announced the high water mark of the public visibility of post-war British modernism, both

before and after the trauma of this event the work of British experimental poets has been sustained by a vibrant network of small magazines and presses.

Corcoran's history of the post-war period comes nowhere near an accurate assessment of the work of British modernists since the war. In fact a vibrant network of small press publishers and little magazine editors has been extremely active. This network performed the crucial function of putting poets in touch, getting their work out, extending contacts with Europe and America, and reclaiming senior figures of British modernism such as Basil Bunting, Hugh MacDiarmid, and David Jones from establishment neglect. Significant magazine titles of this period include: Tom Raworth's *Outburst*; Lee Harwood's *Tzarad*; Andrew Crozier and Peter Riley's *The English Intelligencer*; Tim Longville's *Grosseteste Review*. Important small presses include: Gael Turnbull's Migrant Press; Stuart and Dierdre Montgomery's Fulcrum Press, which along with Migrant was responsible for the recovery of Basil Bunting's work; Bob Cobbing's Writer's Forum; Goliard Press (later Cape-Goliard), which under the editorship of Raworth, Barry Hall, and Nathaniel Tarn, introduced the work of Charles Olson. The history of this small press and magazine activity is becoming increasingly well known.[27] Furthermore, the persistence of British modernism from the 1920s onwards, and its influence upon more recent work, is becoming more widely documented. Sinclair's *Conductor's of Chaos*, for example, includes work by J.F. Hendry, W.S. Graham, David Jones, David Gascoyne, and Nicholas Moore, introduced and selected by some of its contemporary contributors. Keith Tuma's recent study of the relations (or lack of them) between contemporary British poetry and its American readers has done important work in recovering such a context of influence across the generations of British experimentalists. Tuma points out that the anti-modernist version of British literary history has been monumentalised for American readers by the account of Poundian modernism narrated by Hugh Kenner in *The Pound Era*, and consolidated by the arguments of his *A Sinking Island*. 'British poetry beyond the 1914 Vorticist nexus in London', Tuma argues, 'has often been an oddity, as if Britain were the land the "revolution of the word" never knew'.[28]

For poets and critics working within the modernist tradition Kenner's

assessment of the British situation will have felt to be all too true. No wonder then that critical accounts of the dominant poetic that have followed Crozier's critique in 'Thrills and frills' have become increasingly dogmatic. In the remainder of this chapter I will illustrate how, armed with the tools of post-structuralist theory, critics and poets in the modernist tradition have launched a vociferous attack on the dominant poetics.

One of the most sustained theoretical and polemic critiques of the dominant tradition in English poetry by a critic sympathetic towards the poetics of formal innovation has been waged by Antony Easthope. *Poetry as Discourse*, Easthope's account of the formative stages in the history of English poetry for the Methuen New Accents series, is a key text in the saga of the British engagement with post-structuralist ideas.[29] As such Easthope's arguments here and in a series of polemic articles have been influential in the developing critique of the dominant poetic.

Easthope's thesis is that the tradition of English poetry has contributed to the ideological task of encoding the autonomous sovereign individual at the centre of English culture's sense of itself. His important intervention as far as a discussion of the politics of representation in poetry is concerned is that he argues that the twentieth-century has witnessed a crisis over the individual, or subject, so that the dominant 'liberal-humanist' and Romantic conceptions of 'the self', and the poetic realisation of 'individual imaginative experience' so cherished by the dominant tradition, have been called into question, a questioning that is reflected in the disruptive formal procedures of Modernism and accounted for in the theoretical insights of post-structuralism. He goes on to offer an overview of British poetry in the twentieth century based upon an understanding of the break that Modernism opened up in conventional liberal-humanist and Romantic conceptions of the individual in poetry which concludes that the importance of the disruptions of Modernism have been shamefully ignored by the mainstream of poetic opinion in Britain today.

Easthope's critique of the dominant tradition in *Poetry as Discourse* is founded upon an argument that sees the iambic pentameter as complicit with a

model of language, the conduit model, that can be said to have ideological consequences. The conduit model understands language as the vehicle for the communication of thoughts and ideas between an addresser and an addressee. As such its ideal realisation is of the invisibility of the vehicle, the transparency of language, which enables the 'direct' communication of thought and ideas from speaker to audience, from page to reader. Easthope argues that the desired transparency of the conduit model has ideological consequences, because the apparent transparency of a particular discourse can become yoked with the referential function of language:

> The language of a poem may aim for transparency but this does not make a poem referential. Transparency, a certain relation of signifier and signified, is not the same thing as reference, which is a relation between the signified and reality [...] In all discourse the signifier precedes the signified and no discourse is by nature transparent. But this fact does not preclude there being a discourse which gives knowledge by referring to a reality. It does mean that a discourse providing such knowledge depends upon the reader being positioned so as to read the discourse as transparent and treat it as referential.[30]

It is this yoking of transparency and the referential function of language that Easthope sees as dangerous, and it forms the substantive core of his objection to the poetics of the dominant tradition, which he sees as exploiting an ideologically loaded means of representation while maintaining a pose of disinterestedness in order to position the reader so as to read poetic discourse as transparent and to treat it as referential:

> The means of representation is not a neutral vehicle that could equally be used to convey some other ideological signified but is already "shaped" for ideology and is therefore itself ideological [...] Once transparency is rejected as defining the nature of discourse, then the form/content opposition must go. Once this goes, it is no longer possible to distinguish the signified (which is ideological) from the signifier or means of representation (which is not). Ideology can no longer be ghettoized as belonging only or mainly to the signified. This view holds for all discourse - it is only more manifestly applicable to a poetic discourse because poetry is specified by condensation of the signifier. And it confers immediate advantages on the analysis of poetry, for it at once makes visible as ideological what otherwise is disregarded as merely the means of representation. Every aspect of a poetic discourse becomes available for interrogation, especially those

> conventionally left unproblematized as aesthetic, formal and natural. (pp. 22-23)

In structuralist terms the reduction of friction and inertia within the text entails the subordination of the signifier to the signified, of word sound or graphemic notation to meaning. Although for structuralist linguistics the distinction between signifier and signified remains irreducible the elision of the gap between them in the transparent text has as a corollary the collapse of another distinction central to structuralist discourse analysis, that between the enounced and enunciation. This distinction is a crucial concept within Lacanian psychoanalytic accounts of the linguistic formation of the subject. As Alan Sheridan (the translator of the English edition of *Ecrits*) describes it, '"Enonce", which I translate as "statement", refers to the actual words uttered, "enonciation" to the act of uttering them'.[31] Easthope describes the implications for the linguistic formation of the subject of the distinction between the signifier and the signified, on the one hand, and the enounced and enunciation, on the other, in the following way: 'The planes of signifier and signified always remain disjunct, and two positions for the speaking subject need to be distinguished, one as subject of the signifier or process of enunciation, another as subject of the signified or enounced or statement'.[32] It is Easthope's claim that the iambic pentameter of the dominant tradition in English poetry subordinates signifier to signified and in doing so also collapses the subject of enunciation of the text into the position of the subject of the enounced, thereby presenting the speaking voice of the poem as a transcendental ego:

> English poetic discourse is rooted in the pentameter. Through it certain ideological meanings and a subject position are "written into" the discourse [...] [The pentameter] promotes the "realist" effect of an individual voice "actually" speaking. To provide this, a position for the reader as subject of the enounced must be fixed in a coherence, a stability "of its own". Fixity is achieved mainly in two ways: as signifier is held firmly onto signified in the syntagmatic chain, as the work/ play of the signifier is denied. (p. 76)

This argument involves a sweeping historical reading of the development of English poetry since the Renaissance. In broad outline Easthope argues that before the Renaissance, in the form of the feudal ballad for example, poetry:

'exhibits rather than tries to conceal the dependence of the signified on the signifier'. A function that is different to that of the pentameter in that: 'The attempt is not to hold enunciation onto the enounced but rather to celebrate the work/play of the signifier. Thus, a place for the subject of the enounced is produced but it is exhibited as product of the process of enunciation on which it depends' (p. 93). For Easthope pre-Renaissance poetry is fundamentally non-transparent, and in that it engages its readers or listeners in the active production of meaning displays a laudable collective ethos. Poetry from the Renaissance onwards, however, courts transparency through the foregrounding of the speaking voice of the poem and in doing so becomes one locus of the foundation of the autonomous bourgeois subject: 'At the Renaissance [...] poetry [...] aims to give transparent access to the represented. Typically in poetry the represented consists in the first place of an individual speaking. The bourgeois tradition is founded as the project of imitating spoken intonation in poetry so as to make this effect convincing' (pp. 95-96). It is, Easthope argues, the iambic pentameter that serves as the vehicle for the ideological inscription of the bourgeois subject into poetry:

> Iambic pentameter works to deny the position of subject of enunciation in favour of that of the subject of the enounced; it would disclaim the voice speaking the poem in favour of the voice represented in the poem, speaking what it says. Accordingly pentameter is able to promote representation of someone "really" speaking [...] By eliding metricality in favour of "the prosody of natural speech" the pentameter would render poetic discourse transparent, aiming to identify the speaking of a poem with the speaking of a represented speaker or narrator; it identifies the reader into position of imaginary identification with the single voice, this represented presence. (pp. 74-75)

Easthope cites Shakespeare's Sonnets as the founding moment of the pentameter's ideological inscription of the 'reality' effect within English poetry, arguing that: '"Sonnet 73" aims for a closure in the syntagmatic chain which will foreground the enounced and so dominate the process of enunciation. It seeks to emphasize the poem as meaning rather than as language' (p. 103). Easthope's key claim here, then, is that at the Renaissance a sea-change occurred in English poetry so that, 'Through coherent representation of a vivid and substantial speaker the poem foregrounds a position for the reader as subject of the

enounced while denying his or her position as subject of enunciation' (p. 107).

Moving on from a consideration of Renaissance poetry Easthope traces the consolidation of the positioning of the reader as subject of the enounced in the Augustan period typified by the closed couplets of Alexander Pope. However, he argues that the next significant development in English poetic discourse takes place during the Romantic movement in which the reader's positioning as subject of the enounced is given a further twist so that he or she now identifies with the expressiveness of the author:

> The special innovation of Romantic poetry can be seen in the way it would deal with the process of enunciation. The kind of iconicity by which non-poetic or spoken intonation is represented is taken to an extreme: the poem's enunciation now seeks to conform throughout to the state of mind of its represented speaker. The effect is novel and merits separate designation as expressiveness. (p. 130)

Easthope summarises his position in the opening section to his article on Sylvia Plath, which identifies a poetic tradition running from Wordsworth, through Tennyson, to Hardy: 'Identification of poem with author was promoted at the Renaissance but ratcheted up to an extreme point in the Romantic movement. Romanticism believed the text should as far as possible express its author's personal experience' (p. 224). Yet while Romantic poetry, as Wordsworth states it in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, was committed to the poet's expression of 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', it was Easthope suggests always uneasily aware of the mediation of expression by signification. As Wordsworth puts it, the work of the poet through the medium of language is 'slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering'.[33] Despite this, however, Easthope's suggestion seems to be that the 'Egotistical Sublime' of the High Romantic lyric mode was able to 'efface the unbridgeable gap between signifier and meaning', (p. 224) as the reader is positioned so as to make an imaginary identification with the 'single voice, this represented presence' of the author of the poem.[34] The Romantic lyric would then be the high-point of the post-Renaissance bourgeois tradition in which the subject appears as the autonomous, transcendent, 'author of himself'.

From this pinnacle, however, Easthope suggests that the ever increasing pressures of modernity make this Imaginary autonomy of the subject more and more palpably untenable: 'There are a variety of ways to refer to the causes for this pressure but I would stress how the rapid development of modernity renders the apparent self-sufficiency of the individual subject increasingly impossible by revealing its dependence on Darwinian nature, on its positioning in the social formation, on the process of the unconscious and of the body'. [35]

Post-Romantic poetry, for Easthope, registers a process of increasingly futile attempts to ward off this knowledge of the decentered subject. He argues that the mid-nineteenth-century's poet is embarked upon a 'self-defeating' attempt to create a 'plenitude of the sign' in which (as Sinfield puts it) 'the arbitrariness of language seems to be controlled' (p. 224). The struggle to assert the autonomy of the self by subordinating signifier to signified, Easthope argues, is continued at a new level of desperation in the work of Thomas Hardy. Citing the example of 'The Voice', Easthope points out that Hardy's lyric discourse tends to foreground the signifier to a greater extent than other poets working within the lyric tradition. But, he argues, this does not mean that 'The Voice' 'subvert[s] entirely our sense of the represented reality of the speaker caught in the velleities of inner emotion' (pp 225-226). Instead he argues that:

> the poem moves from a certain foregrounding of poetic effects in the first three stanzas to what, relative to this, must count as direct expression of the represented speaker in the simplicity of the last lines. So the degree to which the poem acknowledges the dependence of signified upon signifier in fact operates a strategy of recuperation, once again aiming to contain, manage and control the arbitrariness of language. (p. 226)

Easthope concludes that Hardy's poetry dramatises the last gasps of the bourgeois tradition that privileges the apparent autonomy of the individual over the linguistic and social formation of the subject. It remains interesting because the tension between the primacy of the signifier and the struggle to recuperate a position for the presence of the speaking voice of the poem represents the last desperate struggle to preserve the transcendence of the self in the face of the ineluctable incursion of the pressures of modernity which will soon be

recognised in the fractured text of Modernism:

> The insistence of the signifier is squeezing Hardy's writing more tightly than before and it is a measure of its continuing interest that it recognises that pressure. One might over dramatise the situation by saying that in these lyrics of the years just before the First World War Hardy's writing almost foresees the impending crisis of Modernism but retains a pre-Modernist privileging of voice over signifier. With Modernism and the conditions to which Modernist poetry responds that relation is reversed. On the one side the self-standing individual becomes problematised [...] On the other, the primacy and foundational insistence of the signifier as the condition within which subjectivity emerges becomes openly acknowledged. (p. 226)

For Easthope Modernism's registering of the primacy and foundational insistence of the signifier is paradigmatically illustrated by the work of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. It should not be underestimated how complete a break Easthope sees their work as making from the tradition of English poetry established at the Renaissance, a point he makes clear in 'Why Contemporary Poetry is so bad':

> Traditional (bourgeois) art rested on the assumption that a sovereign individual could communicate to another as though through the transparent medium of a text. The formal disruptions of Modernism were in fact an admission that no such transparency was possible, nor could art be based any longer on the presumption that the subject stood freely able to 'communicate'. [36]

In the article discussing the poetry of Sylvia Plath Easthope goes on to insist that the demise of the autonomous individual as made apparent by the formal disruptions of Modernism is no temporary aberration and that any attempt to resurrect it can only be an act of bad faith:

> From Modernism on, as the Minervan flight of post-structuralism shows, the ineluctable dependence of presence on difference, of imaginary plenitude on the symbolic order of the signifier, cannot be evaded. Or rather it can, but only at the price of repeating what has been done before and disavowing the consequences (for poetry) of writing such as that of Eliot and Pound. (p. 227)

It is of committing precisely such a disavowal of the lesson of Modernism that Easthope accuses the dominant tradition of contemporary British poetry. Drawing on Andrew Crozier's important article 'Thrills and frills: poetry as

figures of empirical lyricism' Easthope concurs that the development of poetry since the war in this country has been 'bleak in the extreme' (p227):

> the hegemonic post-war tradition, emerging from the Movement of the 1950s and promoted on virtually all sides by the literary pages of the *Guardian*, John Carey in the *Sunday Times*, much of the academic press and whenever poetry is mentioned on Channel 4 and BBC 2, consists of a line of succession that runs from Philip Larkin through Ted Hughes to Seamus Heaney. This is what Charles Bernstein has spoken of as the British High Anti-Modernist tradition and it is characterised by an endeavour to represent the empirical individual, staged in terms of the depths of the inward self, with a corresponding necessity to deny, contain or - on Hardyesque precedent - to recuperate the operation of the signifier. A precondition for this lyric-confessional mainstream tradition to hold sway is that the Modernism of Eliot and Pound should be concreted over leaving the road directly open back to the comfort of Hardy. (p. 228)

The road back to the comfort of Hardy has, Easthope argues, been kept open by a two-pronged strategy of denial of the lesson of Modernism. First Modernism has been discounted as being unEnglish, and, second, it has been condemned for its tendency to lead to right-wing political positions. Easthope cites Alvarez's polemical introduction to *The New Poetry* and Davie's influential *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* as his authorities for this claim. (p228) Both of these commentators quote approvingly Robert Graves' remark that "vers libre could come to nothing in England", an assessment that Easthope maintains is borne out by the development of the post-war canon running from Larkin through Hughes to Heaney:

> Such work is Hardyesque, essentially Georgian poetry in the lyric-confessional mode except that to Hardy's recuperation of the signifier it adds what it has indeed taken on board from Modernism, a certain patina or decoration of technique in vocabulary and metaphor which it turns mainly to the purpose of a more plausible expressiveness. (p. 228-289)

Easthope is convinced that such has been the bad faith of post-war poets and the critical and publishing frameworks that has supported them that he concludes his article 'Why Contemporary Poetry is so bad' by arguing that despite the impact of the Modernist experiments of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound at the beginning of the century, the impetus of Modernism's decentring of the subject has been entirely ignored. Since the 1930s, he argues, 'the dominant tradition of

liberal-humanism re-asserted itself' with the result that 'what we are faced with now in English poetry is, I suppose, typically enough exemplified by the Morrison and Motion anthology, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*', in which '"imagination" and the Wordsworthian Romantic self, the "individual" supposedly fully expressing its own "personal experience", is resuscitated into a ghostly afterlife, not twenty years but nearly two centuries after the event' (p. 37).

For Easthope, then, the dominant poetic tradition represents a conspiracy between liberal humanist critics and poets who adhere to the outdated precepts of the Romantic lyric self in order to silence the crucial insights of the 'project of Modernist poetry and poetry acknowledging that now nearly eighty year old inheritance'.[37] The consequence of this is that 'most poetry now written [in England] is dead on the branch; and that the sooner traditional criticism is deposed and post-structuralism becomes a hegemony [...] the better for contemporary poetry.'[38]

It is true that Easthope's account of the opposition between the dominant poetic tradition is polemic, especially as it is developed here in open defiance of *P.N. Review*'s hostility towards the advances of post-structuralist theory in Britain. However, although the argument as he draws it is heightened, it is certainly a position that is recognisable in other commentators upon the divisions within contemporary British poetry. Robert Sheppard, who is a poet, publisher, and critic working within the Modernist tradition delineates a similar tension focussed around the positioning of the poetic self, explicitly drawing on the critique of the dominant poetry made by Easthope.

Sheppard argues that the poetry of the 1950s, the 'Movement' verse typified by the work of Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, and Donald Davie, eclipsed Modernist experimentation in which language was foregrounded, and replaced it with a poetry centred upon individual experience. Discussing Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney' he points out:

> It is a poetry that atomizes the world into discrete, recognizable and consumable 'experiences' [...] Grammar and syntax are not

> open to modernist disruption and the Movement poems' common insistence upon the speaking voice strives to maintain the effect of a stable ego for the narrator, an individualized human personality. The iambic base levels the speech of tonal levity, emphasizes presence, although the rhymes and pentameters are disguised by run-ons. It appears to deny its own artifice; its form is invisible.[39]

Easthope and Sheppard then describe an opposition between the poetics of formal innovation and the dominant poetic tradition based on a distinction between the way in which the two poetries can be shown to conceptualise the relationship between language and the self. In the next chapter I will discuss the way in which this critique of the dominant tradition has during the revisionist phase in the history of post-war poetry formed an alliance against the centre with other marginalised poetries, the work of Black British and women poets. However, I will argue that in the important revisionist anthology *The New British Poetry* this alliance can be seen to be extremely fragile.

Endnotes

[1] *New Lines*, ed. by Robert Conquest, (London: Macmillan, 1956); *The New Poetry*, ed. by A. Alvarez (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; Revised 1966); *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, ed. by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). Subsequent references will be given in the main body of the text.
[2] Andrew Crozier, 'Thrills and frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism' in *Society and Literature: 1945-1970*, ed. by Alan Sinfield, (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 199-233.
[3] Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 94.
[4] Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*, (Oxford: OUP, 1980).
[5] Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse and Articulate Energy*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. x.
[6] *The White Horseman: Prose and Verse of the New Apocalypse*, ed. by J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece, (London: Routledge, 1941).
[7] John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse*, (London: OUP, 1969), pp.232-233.
[8] *New Lines*, p. 21.
[9] Donald Davie, 'Rejoinder to a Critic', in *New Lines*, p. 67.
[10] Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture, 1995' in Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, p. 452.
[11] Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, (London: Longman, 1993), p. 172.
[12] Mark Lawson, 'After the Nobel: Mark Lawson talks to Seamus Heaney', *Guardian 2*, 30 April 1996, p. 3.
[13] Fintan O'Toole, *Sunday Telegraph, Arts and Books*, 4 May 1996, p. 3.
[14] Annabel Patterson, 'Lyric and Society in Jonson's *Under-wood*', in *Lyric Poetry: After the New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 151.
[15] Rebecca O'Rourke, 'Mediums, Messages and Noisy Amateurs', in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 1.3 1990, 275-286, (p280).
[16] Jonathan Culler, 'Changes in the Study of the Lyric', in Hosek and Parker, pp. 38-53, (p.50).
[17] de Man, 'Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory' in Hosek and Parker, pp. 55-72, (p. 55).
[18] Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 24-25.
[19] Crozier, 'Thrills and frills', p 218.
[20] Burton Hatlen, in Peter Middleton, 'Who Am I To Speak? The Politics of Subjectivity in Recent British Poetry', in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 107-133, (p. 119).
[21] Roger Ellis, 'Mapping the UK Little Magazine Field', in Hampson and Barry, pp.72-103 (p. 84). For Mottram's own account of this affair see his 'Editing

Poetry Review', in *Poetry Information*, 20/21 (Winter 1979/80), 154-155. For accounts of the history of *Poetry Review* since 1909, including Mottram's time as editor, see Wolfgang Görtschacher, '*Poetry Review* – From the Poetry Society's Gazette to the Best Mainstream Magazine' in Görtschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles: The Little Magazines in Great Britain 1939-1993* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1993), pp. 507-518; and Abby Arthur Johnson, 'The Politics of a Literary Magazine: A Study of *The Poetry Review*, 1912-1972', in *Journal of Modern Literature*, 3 (1973/1974), pp. 951-964.
[22] Neil Corcoran's *English Poetry Since 1940*.
[23] *The New Poetry*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993)
[24] Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out*, (London: Faber, 1972); *North*, (London: Faber, 1975).
[25] Frank Kermode, 'The Modern', in *Modern Essays*, (London: Fontana, 1971), pp. 39-70.
[26] Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 183.
[27] See Ellis; Eric Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75', in Hampson and Barry, pp. 15-50; Barry MacSweeney, The British Poetry Revival 1965-1979', in *South East Arts Review*, Spring 1979, pp. 33-46; The most exhaustive account of post-war small magazine activity, across all strands of British poetry is provided by Wolfgang Görtschacher's 'The History of the Little Magazines 1939-1993' in Görtschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles*, pp. 88-231.
[28] Tuma, p. 15; Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1975); Kenner, *A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers*. (New York: Knopf, 1988).
[29] Antony Easthope, *Poetry As Discourse*, (London: Methuen, 1983). Subsequent references will be cited in the main body of the text.
[30] Eathope, *Poetry as Discourse*, p.17.
[31] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 1992), pix.
[32] Antony Easthope, 'Reading the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *English*, 43 (1994), 223-235, (p. 230).
[33] William Wordsworth, 'Prefaces, etc', in *Wordsworth Poetical Works*, ed., by Thomas Hutchinson; Revised edition, (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. 737.
[34] Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse*, p. 75.
[35] Easthope, 'Reading the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', p. 224.
[36] Easthope, 'Why most contemporary poetry is so bad', *PN Review* 48 (1985), 36-38, (p. 37).
[37] Easthope, 'Prynne's Imaginary: "Song in Sight of the World"', *Fragmente* 6 1995, 100-104, (p. 101).
[38] Easthope, 'Why most contemporary poetry is so bad', p.36.
[39] Robert Sheppard, 'British poetry and its discontents', in *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s*, ed., by Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 160-180, (pp 162-163).

Chapter Two: A Treacherous Assault

In Chapter One I used Andrew Crozier's essay 'Thrills and frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism' to argue that *New Lines*, *The New Poetry* and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, despite their surface differences, share a common poetic which, forged in the 1950s as a post-war reaction to what were seen as the excesses of modernism, has become the dominant mode in contemporary British poetry. As Crozier writes in the introduction to *A Various Art*, and as I have pointed out in Chapter One, the hegemony of the dominant mode was won at considerable cost: 'the redefinition of taste in the 1950s had had to be enacted by means of a wholesale rewriting of and reorientation towards the history of modern poetry, and this included the virtual suppression of parts of it'.[1] Crozier's anthology is part of the revisionist phase in the recent history of contemporary British poetry which saw the attempt to redress such exclusions. However, in this chapter I will discuss *The New British Poetry* as the representative anthology of this revisionist phase because the range of exclusions it seeks to redress is wider than that of Crozier's anthology.[2]

The New British Poetry sets out to challenge what it describes as this 'narrowly defined orthodoxy'.[3] And on the one hand the anthology identifies this orthodoxy in very similar terms to Crozier, as Eric Mottram describes introducing a selection of work by poets working in the modernist tradition: 'From Robert Conquest's *New Lines* and G.S. Fraser's *Poetry Now* (the classic Movement' anthologies, both published in 1956) through to Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), an assumed singular authority of a certain narrow range of British poetry has been maintained'.[4] However, on the other hand the exclusions that Crozier and Mottram identify concern work that has fallen outside of the 'narrow range' of 'authoritatively' sanctioned British poetry because, they claim, it is formally innovative, and open to the example of the poetics of modernism. This exclusion of work, which, despite its lack of exposure to a wide audience, has maintained a vigorous and productive presence within the small press and small magazine enclaves of poetic activity, constitutes a significant distortion in the map of

contemporary British poetry. However, the further exclusions of a narrowly defined mainstream are immediately apparent. Women are as seriously under represented by *New Lines*, *The New Poetry*, and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. Out of fifty-one contributors to these anthologies only eight are women. Such under representation is not explicable solely in terms of the dates of publication of the earlier two anthologies, in which Elizabeth Jennings is Conquest's sole female contributor, and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, added belatedly to the 1966 revised edition, are Alvarez's only female contributors. The marginalisation of women remains consistent in Morrison and Motion's 1982 anthology, in which, out of twenty contributors, only five are women. This failure to represent the work of women persisted into the late 1980s, when, for instance, Rebecca O'Rourke noted that in 1989, out of the three hundred and twenty-seven poets included on the current poetry lists of six major poetry publishing firms, only sixty were women.[5]

The situation for ethnic minority poets working throughout this period has been even bleaker. Not one ethnic minority poet appears in any of the anthologies cited above! David Dabydeen has argued that the failure to represent the work of ethnic poets during this period has not simply been a consequence of neglect, but has amounted to a purge of all markers of ethnicity:

> The pressure now is [...] towards mimicry. Either you drop the epithet 'black'and think of yourself as a 'writer' (a few of us foolishly embrace this position,desirous of the status of 'writing' and knowing that 'black' is blighted) – that is, you cease dwelling on the nigger/tribal/nationalistic theme, you cease *folking* up the literature, and become 'universal' – or else you perish in the backwater of small presses, you don'tget published by the 'quality' presses and you don't receive the corresponding patronage of media-hype.[6]

Indeed, as Fred D'Aguiar has attested, in his pointedly entitled essay 'Have you been here long? Black poetry in Britain', 'It [has been] left to the black presses [...] and to smaller, specialist poetry presses to help the work of black poets to see daylight'.[7]

Significantly, Dabydeen offers a critique of the exclusionary tendencies of the

dominant poetic in very similar terms to the critique made of it by Crozier and others. Dabydeen explains in his essay 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today' how he came to write his first collection of poetry explicitly against the poetic norms of the dominant tradition. Dabydeen draws a distinction between the vitality of creolised poetries and the complacency of the dominant tradition, arguing that the language of poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Agard reacts 'against the "rational structure and comprehensible language" which Robert Conquest saw as a distinguishing feature of the Movement poets and which still afflicts contemporary English verse' (pp. 10-11). Dabydeen illustrates the complacency of the dominant tradition with a quotation from Andrew Motion's poem 'Anne Frank Huis', included by Motion and Blake Morrison in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*:

> to leave as simply as I do
> and walk where couples drift at ease
> up dusty tree-lined avenues, or watch
> a silent barge come clear of bridges
> settling their reflections in the blue canal (p. 134).

Dabydeen comments of this concluding stanza that, 'There is glibness and gentility disguised as understatement but really amounting to a kind of obscenity'. (p11) Motion's poem is 'obscene' because it distances the traumatic experience of the Nazi occupation of Holland through the 'gentility' and the 'rational structure and comprehensible language' of the dominant idiom of contemporary British poetry. Although Motion's poem gestures towards an uneasiness at taking the experience of a victim of the Holocaust as its occasion, 'just listening/ is a kind of guilt' (p. 134), it quickly puts these qualms behind it as the lyric voice gathers up the museum's reminders of the horror that has been into an injunction to the reader to 'Imagine it -' (p. 134). The 'it' that the reader is left to contemplate is not the suffering of Anne Frank but the sensibility of the poet in constructing an image of wistful regret. Although this sounds akin to Alvarez's impatience with Movement 'gentility', Dabydeen's criticism has more in common with a critic such as Antony Easthope who, impatient with English poetry's apparent thraldom to the iambic pentameter, repeats Pound's call to 'break the pentameter'. Dabydeen, in fact, hails the success of Afro-Caribbean poets, such as Agard and Johnson, whose achievement has been, he argues, to 'shatter the frame of the iambic pentameter' (p. 12).

The New British Poetry is responsive to this convergence of critiques, so that the 'treacherous assault on British poetry' that it intends is not limited to its showcasing of formally innovative work, but extends to its inclusion of the work of Black British poets, and a more than merely token presence of the work of women poets, alongside that of their formally innovative contemporaries. 'Rather than to present a closed canon of "approved" writers', the anthology commits itself to ending the history of exclusion in post-war British poetry, which has resulted in the marginalisation of formally innovative poetries and identity poetries: 'Work from very different traditions is brought together with a common accent on creating a new language for poetry, and on addressing areas of experience which have often not been acknowledged in the self-elected "mainstream" of British poetry'.[8] There exists here the potential of a radical alliance of identity poetries and the poetics of formal innovation against the mainstream. However, as I will demonstrate this alliance is extremely fragile.

The New British Poetry consists of four sections: 'Black British Poetry'; 'Quote Feminist Unquote Poetry'; 'A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry'; 'Some Younger Poets'. These sections are edited by Fred D'Aguiar, Gillian Allnutt, Eric Mottram, and Ken Edwards respectively. The sections edited by D'Aguiar and Allnutt comprise of identity poetries, that is the work of poets committed to the expression of the voices and the experiences of women and ethnic minorities, whose stories have gone largely untold within the mainstream. The sections edited by Mottram and Edwards bring together two generations of British experimental poetry. In what follows I will first describe the salient characteristics of the two sections on Black British poetry and feminist poetry. I will then contrast these with a description of the characteristics of experimental poetry. I will conclude the chapter by arguing that the tensions generated by the different versions of the politics of representation employed by these two traditions causes the radical alliance proposed by *The New British Poetry* between identity poetries and the poetics of formal innovation to implode upon itself

Fred D'Aguiar, introducing the Black British section of the anthology, describes his chosen poets, who include such important figures as James Berry, David Dabydeen, Jackie Kay, and Grace Nichols, as being 'distinguished' by their 'black identity' and by their 'sense of being "other" than what is lauded as indigenous and capitally British'. Their work is concerned with 'the realities of power, of social and economic inequality' and 'it is often instructive as allegory about life in Britain'.[9] It is poetry that responds to the call of the narrator in Dabydeen's 'Coolie Odyssey' to represent black experience, 'to hymn your own wreck' (p. 27). This call is answered in poems such as John Agard's 'Half-caste' which resists the realities of inequality in British society by ironising a term of racist abuse. Agard's poem uses comedy to expose the dehumanising racism implicit in the term 'half-caste', 'Excuse me / standing on one leg / I'm half-caste' (p. 6). In doing so it forces its interlocutor to address the blindness of racist assumptions:

> when I dream
> I dream half-a-dream
> and when moon begin to glow
> I half-caste human being
> caste half-a-shadow
> but yu must come back tomorrow
>
> wid de whole of yu eye
> an de whole of yu ear
> an de whole of yu mind
>
> an I will tell yu
> de other half
> of my story. (p. 7)

Allnutt argues that the poems she collects, by such leading women poets as Eavan Boland, Carol Ann Duffy, Liz Lochhead, and Michele Roberts, 'respect' each poet's 'own "truth", her own way of seeing and feeling the world'. The poems deal with 'themes' that 'encompass the recognizably feminist', such as 'abortion, sexism in husbands, the reshaping of Greek goddesses and the women of the Old Testament', and 'the womanly', such as 'birth, childcare, the untrivially domestic'.[10] The poems repeatedly report the alienation of female experience within patriarchal society and patriarchal discourses. Allnutt's own poem, 'Alien', uses Virginia Woolf's observation that 'as a woman I have no

country' in order to record her own sense of dispossession, 'this land is my land / to which I have never returned' (p. 80). Like the poems collected by D'Aguiar, which place black experience at the centre of the poem, these poems resist such dispossession by re-imagining the world from female points of view. As Allnutt suggests, this may take the form of the re-writing of Classical and Biblical sources. Alison Fell's 'Medusa on Skyros' (p. 94) re-inflects the Medusa legend to offer a critique of the sexism implicit in 'the parading square' of a Greek Island holiday resort, 'where glossed nations / muddle / in their young / Eurotans'. The poem imagines an older woman who is set apart from the vibrant sexuality of the younger crowd of holidaymakers by her 'bruised face' which 'bags / and bounces / when she laughs'. This woman is subjected to the unwanted advances of 'the men of / middling age / who have been flirting / cool and kingly / into her eyes / into the deep stretched silk / of her breasts'. But rather than submitting passively to the objectifying male gaze this latter day Gorgon returns their gaze. She 'raises / her bright brown / wig / to the men' in an act of empowerment that renders them 'ghostly': 'their sudden skulls / grinning / in the bristle / of her short grey hair'.

Whereas Fell's poem reclaims female experience by re-writing Greek mythology, Michelene Wandor's series of poems on Biblical themes, 'Ruth's story, as told to Lilith', 'Eve's Commentary', Eve to Lilith', and Lilith to Eve' (pp. 125-127), reclaims female experience by placing the lives of women at the centre of the poems, rather than having those lives interpreted solely in relation to husbands or God. Such acts of reclamation also take the form of the poetic consideration of domestic incident. Angie Gilligan's 'Household Dilemma' (p. 97) presents a comic image of domestic bliss, the baked-bean pan and the spoon 'cuddled [in] their grease'. The poem offers an ironic contemplation of the dirty washing-up as a mock epiphanic resolution to the dilemmas posed by the struggle to balance career, child-care, and house-work. Caroline Halliday's 'Ode to my daughter's plimsolls and the mess in her room' (p. 101) also presents an epiphanic moment drawn from domestic incident, 'sipping thin green tea / [my daughter] made for me'. This time the epiphany is in earnest as the responsibilities and joys of the mother/daughter relationship are imaged through

the reciprocated gifts of the 'cup of nettle tea', made by the daughter for the mother, and the ode, written for the daughter by the mother.

These poets, writing explicitly political poetry, use poetic language in a way that has been usefully described by Clair Wills, and which, if the emphasis is shifted from 'female experience' to black experience', applies with equal validity to the work of the poets collected in the 'Black British Poetry' section of the anthology. Such poets, Wills suggests, 'make use of the "expressive" mode, foregrounding representation in their poetry as a way of linking literary and political discourses. Part of the political impetus of their work lies in representing female experience within the institution of literature, and thus within the "public" sphere'.[11]

The work of the poets collected in these two sections of the anthology does challenge the decorum of dominant poetic practice. Agard, for instance, uses phonetic spellings in order to graphemically represent the sounds of black vernacular. Fell's 'Medusa on Skyros' snakes down the page to its concluding image, exploiting the iconic possibilities of free verse to imbue the 'short grey hair' of its protagonist with the fearful power of the Medusa's mane of snakes. But, as Wills suggests, such challenges are not its main priority. However, the poetry collected in the sections edited by Mottram and Edwards represents the work of poets interested primarily in linguistic innovation. This work, Mottram and Edwards argue, has been neglected by the mainstream because it continues the experiments in poetic form pioneered by the modernists. These poets, and they include such important practitioners of formal innovation in contemporary British poetry as Allen Fisher, Roy Fisher, Tom Raworth, Wendy Mulford, Denise Riley, and Maggie O'Sullivan, are said to be committed to 'explorations in language notation and rhythm'.[12] Their 'commonality' is said to be their 'ceaseless urge to create meaning and value in the forms and modalities of the language itself'.[13] As such, 'they stand, in their differing ways, for resistance to habitual responses'.[14] That is to say that these poets are concerned with questioning the representational norms, the dominant formal strategies, of established poetic practice. Theirs is a poetry, Clair Wills argues, 'which in its formal mechanisms recognises the primacy of language over thematic concerns,

and at the same time deconstructs the possibility of the formation of a coherent lyric voice. In modernist or experimental poetry [...] language is not the means of representation but the object of representation itself' (p. 35).

This stress upon 'language itself' is common to the claims that Mottram, Edwards and Crozier make for the poems that they collect in their selections, and it resonates with associations of the 'linguistic turn' that has prevailed in English literary studies since the 1960s. This concern with the foregrounding of language has been a major theme of several secondary works, appearing since the publication of *A Various Art* and *The New British Poetry*, which have sought to explain the significance of the poetry of the British poetry revival. Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson in the introduction to their jointly edited collection of essays, *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, are explicit about the connection between the 'linguistic turn' in literary theory and approaches to contemporary poetry. They offer a symbiotic reading of the relationship between poetry and its critical discourses. They suggest that post-structuralist theory owes much to the practices of High Modernist art, evidencing Jacques Lacan's lifelong interest in Surrealism for this claim.

Contemporary experimental poetry, they claim, coming two generations after the historical moment of High Modernism and Ezra Pound's injunction to 'Make It New!' is in this limited sense 'postmodern'. Equally, contemporary theory, two generations on from Saussure's *Course In General Linguistics*, is also 'postmodern' and therefore provides an appropriate hermeneutic. This congruence produces points of intersection between theory and practice which usefully suggest the faultline between the centre and the margin in contemporary British poetry. Saussure's work is seminal, Easthope and Thompson argue, because:

> It would be hard to exaggerate the importance [...] of the linguistic distinction introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure between the word as signifier or shaped sound and the word as signified or meaning. At this point "reality" as the referent to which words may (or may not) refer becomes a secondary or derivative effect on human discourse, ceasing to be available as a foundation on which certain knowledge can be based. "It is the world of words that creates the world of things" (Lacan); "il n'y a pas hors-texte" (Derrida).

> Philosophy can no longer conceive itself as a Mirror of Nature, to cite the title of Richard Rorty's enormously influential book of 1980.[15]

The Saussurean structuralist bracketing of the referent, they point out, and the Derridean and Lacanian poststructuralist prioritising of the signifier over the signified, has major consequences for the human subject, particularly when also thought through the earlier theories of Marx or Freud:

> And if reality, the world and "physical nature" can no longer be known in itself except as it is constructed within discourse, neither can there be a fixed and universal human nature realised in and by the self-conscious individual. Whether via the inflection of Marx (in which the individual is regarded as a personification of economic and social forces) or via the account of Freud (in which The I that I think I am is dependent upon an unconscious which I can never know), the idea of the individual as fixity and point of origin gives way to the conception of the subject as a partial and provisional position. (p. viii)

The linguistic turn in literary studies described here by Easthope and Thompson resonates with the experimental poets concern with 'language itself'. The decentring of the human subject that Easthope and Thompson claim for theory also chimes with the way in which Mottram, Edwards, and Crozier deliminate the kind of poetry they are against in their introductions. Mottram opposes the 'self-regarding ego and its iambic thuds' of establishment poetry. Edwards argues that the 'main axis' of establishment poetry is the 'quiet, singular, individual voice'. And Crozier, commenting on the dominant poetics, points out that in it 'language was always to be grounded in the presence of a legitimating voice - and that voice took on an impersonally collective tone'.

This opposition between the centre and the margin in contemporary British poetry picks up upon one of the strands of the accounts offered by Mottram, Crozier, and Edwards for the poetry they select to include in their anthologies. A second strand is suggested by Mottram's assertion that the poets he collects 'stand, in their differing ways, for resistance to habitual responses [...] for discovery without safety-net for the poet or for the reader' (p. 131). This suggests the difference in scope of ambition that is being claimed to exist between the centre and the margin. It is a distinction that is registered by the

difference between the ways in which the opposed traditions exploit the formal properties of a poem.

Robert Sheppard, makes explicit the claims for formal innovation in the afterword he co-wrote with Adrian Clarke to the anthology *Floating Capital*.[16] Here it is argued that lessons have been learnt from theory and that 'many of our texts demonstrate its application shifted from referent to signifier in a manner distinct from familiar usage' (p. 123). Clarke and Sheppard go on to claim that the poetry they collect displays some of the following operational axioms:

> [T]hat poetry must extend the inherited paradigms of "poetry"; that this can be accomplished by delaying, or even attempting to eradicate, a reader's process of naturalisation; that new forms of poetic artifice and formalist techniques should be used to defamiliarize the dominant reality principle in order to operate a critique of it; and that poetry can use indeterminacy and discontinuity to fragment and reconstitute text to make new connections so as to innaugurate fresh perceptions, not merely mime the disruption of capitalist production. The reader thus becomes an active co-producer of these writers' texts, and subjectivity becomes a question of linguistic position, not of self-expression or narration.. Reading this work can be an education of activated desire, not its neutralisation by means of passive recognition. (p. 124)

Many of the claims made here are reiterated in Robert Hampson's account of the poetic procedures of the work of the British poetry revival in his contribution to *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*.[17] Hampson draws on Benjamin Whorf's claim that 'the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness' are 'culturally ordained' through language, to argue that formal dislocation, in the words of David Miller, is 'not merely non-sensical' but produces ' a transformation of the cultural basis of the representation of the real' (p. 135). For example, he instances the indeterminacies and dislocations of the work of Allen Fisher, which 'work to defamiliarise the dominant reality principle in order to operate a critique of it' (p. 136). Hampson then inflects these claims through Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* in which it is argued that poetry 'must assimilate the already-known and subject it to a re-working which

suspends and questions its categories, provides alternative orderings' (p. 144). Hampson concludes by endorsing Forrest-Thomson's claim that poetic artifice is the means by which poetry can 'challenge our ordinary linguistic orderings of the world, make us question the way in which we make sense of things, and induce us to consider its alternative linguistic orders as a new way of viewing the world' (pp. 144).

The poems by Tom Raworth chosen by Mottram for inclusion in his section of the anthology are exemplary in the way in which they can be shown to work through many of the ideas discussed above. Raworth's poetry rejects the formal strategies of established poetic practice, resisting habituated strategies of readerly response. Whereas, in mainstream poetry, semantic coherence between a text's title and its opening lines can provide a framework for interpretation, titles in Raworth's work provide few reliable clues to themes or interpretation. Consequently, whether it is the linear prose-like arrangement of words on the page in 'South America' (p. 228), or the word lists of 'Horse Power' (pp. 229-233), the reader is forced to become a co-producer of the text as Raworth exploits an open syntax across which meaning flows fleetingly in and out of focus. The referential function of language is called into question as Raworth draws attention to the materiality of language as a system of differential signifiers. This is made explicit in 'South America', where the comforting illusion of the coincidence of sign and referent as it is presented to a child in a 'First Book of Words', is contrasted with the unsettling possibility of the division between signifier and signified that a post-structuralist re-reading of the unity of the Saussurean sign might suggest:

> he clings to a child's book called 'all my things' which says:
> ball (a picture of a ball) drum (a picture of a drum) book (a
> picture of a book) (p. 228)

Whereas for the poem's protagonist, who clings to childish comforts, words bring possession of the world, '"all my things"', the poem itself describes a disturbing situation in which words do not bring even the image of a referent but only more words. This dislocation is also implicit in 'Horse Power' where the deployment of word lists draws attention to the materiality of language:

unlock

tassel
painting
recorder

harmonica
message
friendship
border
seal
golden
weeks
american

yesterday
behalf
return
regards,
tiger
way
compelled
communist

get
returned
should
disavow (pp. 232-233)

Severed from relationships of contiguity within the unit of the line, language here is stripped to its raw materials of sound patterns and graphemic notations. To the eye the words stand out as black marks on a white page. To the ear the words stand out as discrete units of sound. For both visual and auditory modes of perception sense is subordinated to the materiality of the medium. Meaning in this section of the poem, whether gleaned from sound patterns in rhymes such as 'recorder' / 'border', or derived from echoes of collocations such as 'get / returned' or 'should / disavow', is a residual function of the perceiving mind's rage for order.

This emphasis on the materiality of language has aesthetic consequences. Language, for Raworth, is not, as it is for mainstream poetics, an instrument of expression, but is a system that has power over individual language users. As 'Horse Power' has it:

slavery
what

we
have
words
for (p. 229)

Paradoxically, however, this 'slavery' can yield its own measure of success. In mainstream poetics, where language is considered an instrument of expression, the achievement of the lyric poem, according to Helen Vendler, is its act 'to present, adequately and truthfully [...] the private mind and heart caught in the changing events of a geographical place and a historical epoch'.[18] For Raworth the achievement of the poem is much more precarious. At the beginning of 'South America' the protagonist 'is trying to write down a book he wrote years ago in his head' (p. 228). Within the mainstream poetic tradition this process is merely an act of transcription as language is considered to be subordinate to the internal monologue of inspiration from which poems are created. Andrew Motion, for instance, in an interview marking his succession to the post of Poet Laureate, describes how the genesis of a poem is 'that inarticulate longing to rehabilitate something that's been forgotten or vanquished [...] Before I start writing in my notebook, I've written about half the poem in my head'. Although Motion admits to considerable revisions in his attempts to move from the poem in his head to the finished text, this process is described as merely one of 'sort[ing] it out on the page'. Writing is subordinated to authorial control in a process that solipsistically confirms the poet's identity as creative agent: 'writing is bliss [...] You have the chance of getting right what you want to say [...] I feel a completely free agent – it's quiet, it's free, I'm completely my own person'.[19] In Raworth's 'South America', however, inspiration is subordinated to the mediation of writing. There is no triumphant lyric 'I' presiding over the creative act of the poem. Rather the subject position of the poem is taken by the comparatively diminished pretensions of the third person. Consequently the achievement of the poem is reported rather than proclaimed. The success of the poem hinges not on the creative agency of the poet but on a slip of the pen or a typing mistake:

all one evening he draws on his left arm with felt-tipped pens
an intricate pattern   feels how the pain does give protection
and in the morning finds faint repetitions on the sheets, the inside
of his thigh, his forehead   reaching this point

he sees that he has written pain for paint and it works better
(p. 228)

Furthermore, it turns out that it is not 'he' who is to succeed in writing the book so much as it is 'he' who is to be written upon. For Raworth language inscribes the subject rather than providing the basis for the formation of a coherent lyric voice that might use language as an instrument of expression.

The New British Poetry, therefore, foregrounds the issue of exclusion. It calls attention to a division within contemporary British poetry between a dominant mainstream and a variety of marginalised poetries. Its polemic intervention is precisely to declare that the map of contemporary British poetry as drawn by previous anthologies is unrepresentative, and it offers the radical alliance between identity poetries and formally innovative poetries, against a conservative mainstream, as an alternative, and more representative, mapping of the field of British poetry.

This diagnosis of a significant faultline in contemporary British poetry has proved an enduring analysis. It has, for instance, been repeated in Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's 1999 anthology *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970*.[20] It has also been supported by two collections of essays surveying the field of recent British poetry. Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson identify such a faultline in their 'Afterword' to *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*. Easthope and Thompson claim that the poetics of formal innovation, and poetries informed by the politics of identity, resist the normative languages of power of late capitalism, whereas the dominant poetic tradition is complicit with the hegemonic linguistic order of late capitalism.[21] Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, in the introduction to their jointly edited *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, also describe a conservative mainstream in confrontation with the marginalised poetries of modernist experimentation and identity politics.[22] Hampson and Barry's *New British Poetries* could, in fact, be seen as a companion piece to *The New British Poetry*, its editorial commitment being to 'engage with theoretical and technical issues relating to [the] poetry' collected in the anthology.[23] Indeed, the collection contains essays by Fred

D'Aguiar and Eric Mottram, editors of the 'Black British Poetry' and 'A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry' sections of *The New British Poetry*, in which the authors set out their respective senses of the marginalisation of Black British poetry and formally innovative poetry by a dominant mainstream.[24]

However, this radical alliance of oppositional poetries is fraught with difficulty since it falls foul of its own mixed aesthetic/semiotic and political imperatives. As Anthony Mellors has commented on the juxtaposition made by the editors of *The New British Poetries* of the essays by D'Aguiar and Mottram:

> Ostensively, there is no quarrel here about what constitutes 'radical' or 'alternative' poetic form – poetry by black writers represents a new voice at a remove from the literary establishment as does the small press tradition of the modernists – yet there remain a number of contradictions following from this approach which the editorial position simply glosses over. Crucially, there is an impasse between the formalist ethics/politics of the modernist faction and the populism of other 'minority' groupings.[25]

Mellors's observation applies with equal force to *The New British Poetry*, where the 'impasse' is to be located precisely at the point where 'work from very different traditions', the sections edited by Mottram and Edwards, on the one hand, and those edited by D'Aguiar and Allnutt, on the other, is brought together. The difficulty is generated by the opposition between the categories of 'new language' and 'experience' that the anthology proposes as its challenge to the mainstream of British poetry. Its alignment of identity poetries and linguistically innovative poetries foregrounds both the delegatory and formalist connotations of representation defined above, and inevitably leads to the difficulty which emerges in the clash between the anthology's split imperatives to forge a new innovative language for poetry and to give voice to the experiences of those hitherto unspoken for in the canon of contemporary British poetry. This is because, as we have seen, the concept of representation refers both to the demand made by marginalised groups to use poetry as a means towards representation within the public sphere, and to the critiques of representation as they have been variously taken up by the exponents of formal innovation. These critiques take language itself as the object of its focus, rather than any referent or subjectivity that might be represented by language. This results in a splitting open of the

alliance between the marginalised poetics of formal innovation and the politics of identity, leaving, as Mellors goes on to argue, 'no point of contact between the terms of Mottram's formalist revival and D'Aguiar's broad political representationalism'.[26]

Worse than this, it has produced a situation whereby the adherents of linguistic innovation mistrust the politics of identity poetries. The concern is that the valorisation by identity poetries of concepts such as 'experience, and 'voice' may be complicit with the representational norms of establishment practice, thereby muting what is otherwise an overtly radical political stance taken by these poetries. Charles Bernstein, the American poet and theorist of linguistically innovative work, has succinctly expressed the anxiety: 'Too often, the works selected to represent cultural diversity are those that accept the model of representation assumed by the dominant culture in the first place'.[27] Peter Middleton discusses this 'problem' in the context of an essay concerned with the politics of subjectivity in recent British poetry collected in Hampson and Barry's *New British Poetries*. Middleton points out that, 'to poets writing for and within disenfranchised communities [...] what may read like an affirmation of the universal, fixed self to the dominant culture, is also a radical strategy for creating collective actions within the marginalised social group'. However, having acknowledged the radical political potential of identity poetries, Middleton goes on to qualify this recognition: 'What we can say about such poetic strategies is that they can be mobilised for different ends by the dominant culture, and made to represent quite different moralities and political principles'.[28]

Bernstein and Middleton's accounts of the uneasiness with which adherents of formal innovation view the politics of identity poetries circle around the doubled connotations of the concept of representation that I have outlined above. On the one hand, identity poetries have radical potential to the extent that they can 'represent' cultural diversity. Here 'represent' is understood as performing its delegatory function of representing the experiences of the disenfranchised within the public sphere. On the other hand, to the extent that identity poetries are complicit with dominant 'models of representation' they can be 'made to represent' conservative 'political principles'. Here 'representation' is understood

via its formalist frames of reference, in which modes of representation, such as identity poetries which foreground thematic concerns, are mistrusted. Such mistrust has been expressed by several contributors to the sections of *The New British Poetry* edited by Mottram and Edwards. One contributor, Robert Sheppard, has unfavourably contrasted what he describes as the poetry of 'unproblematic experience' collected in the first two sections of the anthology with the 'artifice of line, breath and eye' of the formal innovations of the last two sections, 'work', he argues, 'which attempts to expose the mechanisms of language in a serious play of signifiers'.[29] Wendy Mulford has criticised thematically based feminist poetry for its adherence to 'traditional modes'. It is, she argues, 'tied to a familiar poetics, in which language is not seen to be problematic'. Formally innovative writing, by contrast, submits to the '"play of language"' and 'resign[s] the authority of the individual poetic voice'.[30] This is a point reiterated by Maggie O'Sullivan in the introduction to the anthology of linguistically innovative poetry by women, *Out of Everywhere*. O'Sullivan argues that:

> Each poet featured here [...] does not represent a familiar world and therefore cannot be read in familiar ways. Consequently, many of them, through brave insistence and engagement in explorative, formally progressive language practices, find themselves excluded from conventional, explicitly generically committed or thematic anthologies of women's poetry. Excluded from "women's canons", such work does, however, connect up with linguistically innovative work by men who have themselves also transcended the agenda-based and cliché-ridden rallying positions of mainstream poetry. Rather than perpetuating prevalent notions of writing poems "about" something, the poets here, to my mind, have each in their own imaginative way committed themselves to excavating language in all its multiple voices and tongues, known and unknown.[31]

This argument usefully highlights the tension between a poetics which frames its politics through a suspicion of 'familiar' modes of representation, and a poetics based upon the politics of identity that O'Sullivan caricatures as 'generically committed', 'agenda-based', and 'cliché-ridden' work. This collapse of the central organisational principle of *The New British Poetry*, its alliance of identity poetries and formally innovative poetries against a

conservative mainstream, is one aspect of what I am describing as the crisis of representation in contemporary poetry.

Endnotes

[1] Andrew Crozier, in *A Various Art*, ed. by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, (London: Paladin, 1990), p. 12
[2] *The New British Poetry 1968-1988*, ed. by Gillian Allnutt et al (London: Paladin, 1988).
[3] John Muckle, 'Publisher's Note, in *The New British Poetry*, p. vi.
[4] Eric Mottram, in *The New British Poetry*, p. 131.
[5] Rebecca O'Rourke, 'Mediums, Messages and Noisy Amateurs', in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 1.3 1990, 275-286, (p. 281).
[6] David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', in Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels (eds.), *The State of the Language: 1990s Edition*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 3-14, (pp.12-13).
[7] Fred D'Aguiar, 'Have You Been Here Long? Black Poetry in Britain', in, *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 51-71, (p.54).
[8] *The New British Poetry*, publisher's blurb.
[9] Fred D'Aguiar, in *The New British Poetry*, p. 3.
[10] Gillian Allnutt, in *The New British Poetry*, pp. 77-78.
[11] Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice', *Critical Quarterly*, 36.3 (1994), 34-52, p. 35.
[12] Eric Mottram, in *The New British Poetry*, p. 131.
[13] Ken Edwards, in *The New British Poetry*, p. 270.
[14] Mottram, p. 131.
[15] *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, ed., by Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991), pp. vii-viii.
[16] *Floating Capital*, ed., by Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard' (Elmwood, CT: Potes & Poets Press, 1991).
[17] Robert Hampson, 'Producing the unknown: Language and Ideology in contemporary poetry', in Hampson and Barry, pp. 134-155.
[18] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 12.
[19] 'The Hands On Laureate', Andrew Motion interviewed by Jane Hardy in *Poetry Review*, 89 2, 1999.
[20] *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970*, ed. by Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999).
[21] *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, ed. by Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 208-210.
[22] Hampson and Peter Barry, pp.1-11.
[23] Hampson and Barry, p. 10.
[24] Fred D'Aguiar, 'Have You Been Here Long? Black Poetry in Britain', in Hampson and Barry, pp.51-71. Eric Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75', in Hampson and Barry, pp. 15-50.
[25] Anthony Mellors, '"Resistance and Representation", Review of *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*', in *Parataxis: Modernism and Modern Writing*, 6, (1994), 49-57 (p. 50).
[26] Mellors, p. 51.

[27] Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 6.
[28] Peter Middleton, 'Who Am I to Speak? The Politics of Subjectivity in Recent British Poetry', in Hampson and Barry, pp. 107-133, (p. 121).
[29] Robert Sheppard, 'Poor Fuckers: The New British Poets', *Pages* 161-168, [n.d.], (p. 163).
[30] Wendy Mulford, '"Curved, Odd...Irregular". A Vision of Contemporary Poetry by Women', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 1.3 1990, 261-274, (pp.261-262).
[31] *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK*, ed. by Maggie O'Sullivan, (London and Saxmundham: Reality Street Editions, 1996), pp. 9-10.

Chapter Three: The Postmodernist Moment?

This Chapter will be in two sections. In the first section I will describe the way in which the much vaunted 'new pluralism' of Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*, *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, and *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, fails to make good the promise of a truly representative account of the post-war period.[1] The second section will mark the turn in this thesis away from the description of the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry and towards a discussion of its significance. In this section I will discuss the way in which the editors of *The New Poetry*, by embracing a superficial account of 'ludic postmodernism' fail to do justice to the way in which contemporary poets, exemplified by the work of Peter Reading, engage with the problem of the relationship between poetic form and experience.

The New Pluralism

In Chapter Two I told the story of how *The New British Poetry* committed itself to ending the history of exclusion in post-war British poetry.[2] Despite the difficulties of that endeavour I want to suggest that the project to end exclusions has been a qualified success. Certainly the work of women and ethnic minority poets is no longer marginalised, and there has been some recognition of the persistence of formally innovative work informed by the poetics of modernism. The revisionary impulse of *The New British Poetry* was consolidated in the 1980s and the 1990s by the 'mainstream' publishing success of anthologies, and single author collections, representing the work of women and ethnic minority poets. Since the publication in 1979 of Lilian Mohin's anthology, *One Foot on the Mountain*, which, as Claire Buck has pointed out, was the first anthology 'to assert the place of women poets as women in British postwar culture', anthologies of poetry by women have become a prominent feature of the poetry publishing scene.[3] Similarly, since the appearance of James Berry's anthology *News for Babylon*, in 1984, and Barbara Burford's *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black British Women Poets*, in 1985, the work of ethnic minority poets has

gained increasing recognition, and individual poets, such as Fred D'Augiar, John Agard, Jackie Kay, and Grace Nichols, have achieved prominence.[4] Even innovative work, notorious for its marginal status, has attained a degree of 'mainstream' exposure. Following the publication of *The New British Poetry* Paladin reprinted in paperback *A Various Art*, an anthology of work in the modernist tradition first published in hardback by Carcanet in 1987.[5] Paladin went on to further the exposure of innovative work by producing collections of *Selected Poems* by leading exponents, and by showcasing the work of others in a short lived, but none the less significant, series of anthologies edited by Iain Sinclair.[6] This exposure has been augmented by Sinclair's 1996 anthology for Picador, *Conductor's of Chaos*.[7] Innovative work has also been made available to a wider audience by the reappearance of the Penguin Modern Poets series, which has included the work of Douglas Oliver, Denise Riley, and Iain Sinclair, alongside that of more mainstream figures such as James Fenton and Carol Ann Duffy.[8] Furthermore, Bloodaxe, the Newcastle based poetry publishing house, whose success in the 1980s and 1990s of establishing itself as a publishing force to contend with the likes of Faber was achieved through the publication of work by women, ethnic minority, and regional poets, has also been welcoming to innovative poetries. It has published work by Roy Fisher, Douglas Oliver, and Barry MacSweeney. It has also made available for the first time to a wide audience the important body of work produced by J.H. Prynne.[9]

Romana Huk describes this transformation as the 'new pluralism', in which (as she quotes Terry Eagleton) 'the marginal becomes somehow central'.[10] Such an invocation of the poetics of plurality is illustrated by the enthusiastically inclusive rhetoric of the introduction to the Bloodaxe anthology *The New Poetry*. As Huk points out, the editors of this anthology self-consciously link the emergence of a pluralised poetry scene to its 'postmodern' cultural moment:

> 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 replaced monocentric totemism. (p. 15)

A similar claim has been made about the state of contemporary poetry by Neil

Corcoran in his *English Poetry Since 1940*.[11] Corcoran draws from Jean-Francois Lyotard's critique of 'master narratives' in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*[12] to argue that: 'The concept or construction of a 'national literary tradition would be one such master narrative; and it seems clear that an essential spirit in contemporary writing is to write against any such totalisation, to disrupt it with other kinds of narrative: those of class, gender, ethnic origin, race and religion' (p. 201). These claims echo the Yeatsean prognosis that in the twentieth-century 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold', but gives it a postmodern twist, so that the collapse of a stable poetics is regarded in a positive light rather than seen as a symptom of decline or a cause for alarm. Indeed, the emphasis placed upon heterogeneity and plurality would seem to imply an overcoming of the invidious hierarchies of centre and periphery, mainstream and underground, that have haunted discussions of canon formation in post-war British poetry. It is as though the postmodern promise of an end to totalising and authoritarian narratives through the celebration of difference and diversity has been made good in the field of contemporary poetry. This is the message proclaimed by the editors of *The New Poetry* who self-consciously place their anthology at the head of a teleological development through the squabbles and divisions of earlier post-war anthologies, offering the characteristic pluralism of their collection as the sublation of earlier antagonisms: 'The new poetry highlights the beginning of the end of British poetry's tribal divisions and isolation, and a new cohesiveness - its constituent parts 'talk' to one another, readily, eloquently, and freely while preserving their unique identities' (p. 16).

It is true, as Sean O'Brien has noted that *The New Poetry* 'goes a greater distance than before to represent the diversity of poetry in English'.[13] But critic John Osbourne's account of the plurality of *The New Poetry* is too sanguine:

> The good news? The anthology shop-windows the strength in depth of current poetries, with Simon Armitage, Peter Didsbury, Carol Ann Duffy, Paul Durcan, Selima Hill, Tom Leonard, Glyn Maxwell and Peter Reading outstanding. In the process the volume marks the end of the old either/or between Larkin and Bunting, regular metres and free verse, nationalism and internationalism, the centre versus the margins.[14]

Certainly the anthology showcases a diversity of women and ethnic minority poets. Many of the poets from the Black British and Feminist sections of *The New British Poetry* are included by the editors in *The New Poetry*. For example Eavan Boland, Liz Lochhead, Michèle Roberts, and Carol Ann Duffy, are represented from Gillian Allnutt's section of the earlier anthology. As are Grace Nichols, Linton Kwesi Johnson, David Dabydeen, Jackie Kay, and Fred D'Aguiar himself from D'Aguiar's section of *The New British Poetry*. It also represents the increasing visibility of poetry from across the component parts of the United Kingdom. Poetry from Scotland is particularly well represented by Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Robert Crawford, W.N. Herbert, and Jackie Kay. The cross-referencing of poets in this name-check is testimony to the erosion of the divisions in contemporary British poetry. But to argue that it marks the end of 'the old either/or' between regular metres and free verse is to argue too much. The more wary assessment made by the senior experimental poet Edwin Morgan is a more accurate description:

> This is a bright, readable, communicative collection which seems almost to have been put together in order to prove what its introduction claims to have discovered, 'the art [of poetry]'s significance as public utterance' [...] [However] the somewhat imperialistic definite article in the book's title will hardly stand, if you consider the omission of names like Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths, Wendy Mulford, Andrew Crozier, Peter Robinson, and Thomas A. Clark. There is a whole area of alternative poetry which appears to have resisted the editors' proclaimed demarginalization.[15]

Indeed, only one poet, Tom Leonard, included in the sections of *The New British Poetry* edited by Eric Mottram and Ken Edwards made it into *The New Poetry*. However, the exclusions made by *The New Poetry* are not limited to a refusal of entry to experimentalists. As Sean O'Brien points out:

> The parallel universe remix of *The New Poetry*, could include all the poets published in Morrison and Motion, plus others born before 1940 not included in Morrison and Motion. Ken Smith, U.A. Fanthorpe, Matt Simpson, Roy Fisher, James Berry, William Scammell, John Whitworth, John Mole and Alistair Elliot were among those mentioned by reviewers. (p. 19)

O'Brien goes on to cite an exhaustive list of younger poets who could also have found a place in a 'remix' of *The New Poetry*. His point is that the editors

of *The New Poetry* are not necessarily culpable in their omissions but that 'the problem of how to get to grips with the sheer volume of work available' is virtually insurmountable. It is a problem encountered by two recent anthologies, Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford's *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, and Sean O'Brien's *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*.

Both anthologies attempt an overview of poetry since 1945 from the perspective of the end of the century, and both anthologies echo the celebration of plurality of *The New Poetry*. O'Brien's introductory survey glosses over past disputes to commend the 'inclusive pleasure' of a period 'as poetically rich as any since the Romantics', which, 'has seen the melting of familiar categories and the establishment of unexpected connections, the emergence of new poetries from formerly unsuspected sources'.[16] In their introduction Armitage and Crawford are acutely aware of the exclusions of earlier anthologies. They are particularly conscious of the exclusion of the voices of women and ethnic minorities, and they are also keen to respond to what Crawford describes elsewhere as the 'devolutionary' impulse in post-war poetry to 'listen to the full spectrum of suppressed but persistent local accents', whether these be Irish, Scottish, Welsh, or those of the English regions.[17] Consequently the editors are committed 'to represent in the strongest way the pluralism of modern poetry from these islands'. They detect a shift in poetry away from the 'hieratic voice of authority (whether that of received pronunciation, the BBC, the Irish Catholic priest, the Oxford don, or the patriarchal male)' and towards 'the democratic voice':

> The notion of 'the democratic voice' is not intended to suggest that all post-war poets sound alike or speak with one intonation – quite the opposite. Continually, these poets display an awareness of inhabiting one voice that is among others, part of a vernacular community surrounded by further vernacular communities. The democratic voice may speak Gaelic or English. It may be gendered as male or female. It is unhieratic, belonging to a culture of pluralism, where its authority is both challenging and challenged.[18]

Clearly the stress upon plurality is both a response to the exclusions of the earlier post-war dispensation, and an attempt to secure a place for poetry within a vision

of multicultural Britain, for which, Armitage and Crawford's disclaimers aside, poetry is suspiciously hieratic. As a 1997 Arts Council consultative paper reveals, 'the general public has a problem with the image of poetry'. Contemporary poetry, in particular, is 'perceived as inaccessible, complex and lacking rhyme and rhythm'.[19] Far from heralding the happy coincidence of a poetics of plurality belonging symbiotically to a culture of pluralism, these introductions raise questions of cultural legitimacy and cultural authority that have been posed by Marjorie Perloff in a recent discussion of literary journalism: 'Who, we say democratically and bravely, is to decide which of the countless poets now plying their trade are worthy of attention? And why is one set of poetic principles [...] any more 'valid' than another?'.[20] What do the pleasures of inclusivity and a poetic authority that is 'both challenging and challenged' amount to?

Very little, according to some hostile reviewers. Armitage and Crawford contrast what they describe as Yeats's 'aristocratic stance' to the democratic voices that they wish to foreground.[21] However, as Tim Kendall points out, Yeats memorably described himself as a democrat in politics, but not in art. 'By contrast', he argues, 'Armitage and Crawford seek to downplay the necessary elitism of value judgement by opting for safety in numbers. In doing so they succeed only in producing an anthology which is offensively inoffensive'.[22] It is a charge that can equally be levelled at O'Brien's anthology. William Scammell points out that the two anthologies 'are remarkably similar in spirit and scope, taking what you might call the lucky-dip approach to poetry'. He notes that Armitage and Crawford include 141 poets and O'Brien 126, and comments, 'No one gets more than four or five poems in either book'; dozens more get a poem each whether they're good, bad or indifferent. All, it seems, must have prizes'.[23] The generosity of these two anthologies is undesirable, Kendall argues, because, 'The period's major poets, of whom there are far fewer than the editors would have us believe, tend to disappear under the detritus of contemporary verse, so that Ted Hughes, for example, seems no more significant than Carol Ann Duffy. To praise everyone is to praise no one'.[24] As Harry Clifton concurs in his review of the Armitage and Crawford anthology, if the editors wish to be, in addition to political democrats, 'democrats in art as well', then they are left with 'the hot

potato of Poetic Value to rid themselves of as quickly as possible'. They achieve this, he agrees with his fellow reviewers, by reducing poetic value to 'a numbers game [...] a sop to all potentially dangerous special interests'.[25] The apparent reasonableness of this appeal to common sense fails to conceal the offensiveness of Kendall's implication that Carol Ann Duffy's work should be ranked among the 'detritus' of contemporary poetry, or that the ambition to behave democratically in art should amount to a sop to 'dangerous' special interest groups. It does, however, highlight the contemporary crisis in establishing grounds upon which to base critical judgements as to which poets are worthy of attention. As Romana Huk has argued: 'The crisis that the acknowledgement 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 judgement (and therefore power)' (p. 4).

Ludic Posmodernism

Despite the problems I have discussed above, the introductions to *The New Poetry*, *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, and *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, retain an assertive confidence in their project to embrace plurality. Whereas the fissure at the core of *The New British Poetry* between its component parts signifies an uncertainty at the revisionist project, the process of rapprochement can be characterised as one of brash confidence in what Peter Forbes, hailing the publication of *The New Poetry*, has described as 'the postmodernist moment':

> This is the happiest time for poetry: for once it basks in an embarrassment of column inches; rising from the bottom of the national review pages to the top, spilling over into double page spreads, even soaring up into the empyrean of The Late Show's airwaves.[26]

Such a euphoric embrace of contemporary poetry's 'postmodernist moment' can partly be explained by the wealth of postmodern theory readily to hand to support assertions of a new poetic era. The postmodern condition in poetry could well be one of diversity in which no one mode of poetic practice dominates and forces the rest into obscurity. Contemporary poetry's much acclaimed

overcoming of outmoded hierarchical differentiations through the play of postmodern plurality can, for instance, find support in discussions of postmodern poetry which distinguish that poetry's achievements from those of its Romantic and Modernist predecessors. Edward Larrissy, for instance, argues in *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* that 'the whole of the modern and contemporary period may be illuminated by considering the question how far modern writing has ever escaped from the set of problems that confronted the Romantics'. Larrissy's initial answer to this question is 'not far, I suspect':

> For we have not yet emerged from the bourgeois epoch consolidated in the revolutions of the Romantic period, and we retain the old problem of the individual, isolated yet aspiring to common meaning, confronting a world from which the deity has absconded or which seems to give, at best, parsimonious evidence of transcendence. To put it another way, the alienation of contemporary society has exacerbated the old Romantic problem of how (or whether) to infuse a world of fascinating but chaotic sense-data with transcendent meaning when one is deprived of agreed myths.[27]

Larrissy's formulation recapitulates the triumverate of key terms in Romantic debates. On the one hand the isolated individual, or subject. On the other, the fascinating world of chaotic sense-data, or the object. And mediating these two polarities the synthesis of transcendent meaning. If the crisis of Romanticism was how to fill the vacuum in transcendental meaning opened up by the death of God, then Larrissy's account implies the characteristic Romantic resolution in which the gap between subject and object is closed by the 'egotistical sublime' of the poet's subjectivity. However, in the absence of the divine guarantee of the transcendental signified the sublimity of poetic imagination is vulnerable. Not only is the overwhelming idealism of poetic subjectivity suspect, but its sovereignty in the face of the recalcitrant objects of sense-data is doubtful. Furthermore, meaning is no longer secured by providential edict but is to be contested socially through language.

However, Larrissy's larger claim is that the disavowal of Romantic modes by much modern writing, the impersonality of High Modernism and the empiricism of Movement and Post-Movement poetry in Britain, masks a deeper continuity.

Idealism may seem the dominant Romantic mode but, as Larrissy argues in his introduction, both Wordsworth and Coleridge were intimately concerned with the quiddity of the objects of their poetic vision. Drawing on the Lacanian account of the formation of the subject, Larrissy argues that the Romantic poem records a negotiation between subject and object that can only ever achieve an Imaginary resolution to the fundamental lack at the core of being. Such resolution that is achieved is through the subject's seizing of the object, objet petit a, in an Imaginary embrace that is thoroughly illusionary. Idealist resolutions of the gap between subject and object mask anxieties that the alterity of the object world escapes signification. Equally, if objectivism seems to be the watch word of modern writing, then this conceals an undiminished concern with poetic subjectivity. As Larrissy puts it, 'the empiricist is not expected to renounce imagination, merely to base it on facts' (p. 10). The apparent exactitude with which discrete objects are described becomes a cover for the operations of the poetic imagination embarrassed by its associations with 'feminine' Romanticism. But, Larrissy suggests (drawing upon the language of post-Lacanian feminism in order to critique modernism's fetishisation of 'masculine' values such as rationality and solidity) this exemplary clarity is only the flimsiest of covers for the crisis in signification announced by the Romantic subject's imperious yet anxious seizing of its object, 'My words cannot master the chaotic object or woman. Let me be hard and clear, unlike a woman' (p. 184).

Both Romanticism and Modernism are on this account shot through with anxieties about the mediation of subject and object by language. Larrissy contends, however, that recent developments in contemporary poetry offer a way out from the impasse of Romantic and Modernist poetics through an engagement with the concerns of postmodernism. Postmodern poetry offers a passage beyond these anxieties about the relationship between subject and object as language itself becomes foregrounded rather than its mediation of subject and object, self and other. The poetry of John Ashbery, for instance, 'seeks to elicit our delight first of all in his medium [language] itself' rather than to instruct us about the world or the mind of the poet (p. 173). Larrissy argues that with the postmodern foregrounding of language comes the recognition that the polarity (inside and outside, self and other) that drives the anxious relationship between

subject and object has been eroded, 'Whatever people think postmodernism is or should be, the subject of the erosion of the difference between 'inside' and 'outside' is in fact part of it' (p. 177). This opens up new possibilities for postmodern poetry free of the anxieties of the legitimacy of the subject's encroachments upon the object, and 'having either attacked or lost interest in the problem of discovering a transcendental principle which would guarantee the truth either of the subject or the object, it simply carries on without attempting to fix the position of either pole' (p. 179). And, Larrissy concludes, postmodern poetry (or perhaps better 'writing') 'may be coming to accept the instability of the arc or thread that stretches between uncertain subject and flickering object, it is finding a new playfulness and, paradoxically confidence there' (p. 183).

The editors of Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry* argue a similar case in their introduction that the poets they anthologise mark a shift away from the concerns of modernism and towards those of postmodernism:

> Modernism posed Cognitive Questions (asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, till around 1958): 'How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?' Postmodernism poses Postcognitive Questions (asked by most artists since then): 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' As in the work of Paul Muldoon, a presiding figure for many of the poets included here, this is more than the relativism that is still gaining currency. It is a realisation that ideas of meaning, truth and understanding are in themselves fictions determined by the rhetorical forms and linguistic terms used to express them. (p. 24)

There are, however, severe problems with this paean to postmodern hetorogeneity and plurality as an accurate description of recent developments in the field of contemporary poetry. Specifically the accounts of the breaching of British poetry's insular exclusivity, on the one hand, and, on the other, the enthusiatic embracing of the playfulness of decentred ecriture, offer a distorted and dangerously apolitical overview of the actual situation. The glaring difficulty with the assertions made by the editors of *The New Poetry*'s is that it depends upon an unattributed borrowing from the work of Brian McHale.

McHale, has argued that the postmodern novel represents a 'change of

dominant' from the concerns of the modernist novel, a shift that he describes through two theses:

> THESIS 1. The dominant of Modernist writing is epistemological. That is, Modernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is there to be known? who knows it? how do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? how is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? how does the object of knowledge change as it it passes from knower to knower? what are the limits of knowledge? and so on.
>
> THESIS 2. The dominant of Postmodernist writing is ontological. That is, Postmodernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is a world? what kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? what happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? how is a projected world structured? and so on.[28]

Despite their substitution of cognitive and postcognitive for empirical and ontological, the dependence of the editors of *The New Poetry* upon the theoretical framework supplied by McHale is obvious. My concern with their use of it is not simply that they fail to attribute the source material for their discussion of the state of poetry, but rather that they use McHale's work to make generalisations about the contemporary culture that McHale is scrupulous to avoid. As Steven Connor has pointed out, 'It is necessary to distinguish between two separate areas of postmodern theory':

> On the one hand, there is the compendium of narratives about the emergence of postmodernism in world culture [...] But, associated with this side of the postmodern debate and in many ways serving as its structural support, is a different account, of the emergence of new forms of social, political and economic arrangement. These two accounts, one of the emergence of postmodernism out of modernism, the other of the emergence of postmodernity out of modernity, run on adjoining tracks, sometimes crossing, but also sometimes diverging from each other in significant ways.[29]

Whereas for Fredric Jameson, one of the key authors of narratives about the emergence of postmodernism in world culture, postmodernism is 'a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order,[30] McHale's project is limited to an analysis of the emergence of

postmodernism from modernism rather than postmodernity from modernity and is therefore much more modest in scope than Jameson's concern with epochal change. Whereas Jameson's insistence that 'it seems to me essential to grasp postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant'[31] entails a detailed analysis of the imbrication of culture within its social and economic determinants, McHale's discussion of a change in dominant from modernist to postmodernist writing refers more precisely to the work in literary history of the Russian Formalists Jurij Tynjanov and Roman Jakobson.[32] In this context, 'change of dominant' refers not to shifts in the macrocosm of the social structure but to changes in the microcosm of the literary system at particular synchronic moments:

> Within a given complex of poetic norms in general, or especially within the set of poetic norms valid for a given poetic genre, elements which were originally secondary become essential and primary. On the other hand, the elements which were originally the dominant ones becomes subsidiary and optional [...] a poetic work [is] a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this hierachy.[33]

McHale's work is primarily a contribution to the formalist concerns of the discipline of 'descriptive poetics' (p. 55) which has developed out of the Russian Formalist approach to literary history, an attempt to solve from a formalist perspective a problem that has perplexed theorists of the emergence of postmodernist writing from modernist writing: how does the self-reflexivity of postmodernist fiction differ from the preoccupation with their own fictionality displayed by modernist texts such as *Ulysses* and *To the Lighthouse*?

McHale's solution to the conundrum is to offer the formalist concept of the dominant, suggesting a shift from the modernist epistemological dominant to the postmodernist ontological dominant outlined in the two theses quoted above. He is explicit as to the provisionality of this formulation, 'This [...] is a strategic definition, "merely" instrumental, and only one of (no doubt) many possible definitions of Postmodernism' (p. 73). It is 'strategic' in that it is 'apropos of something else - some other proposed categorization or literary-historical model, some perceived contradiction or shortcoming in the currently-accepted literary historical model, some anticipated gain in scope of tidiness' (p. 53). In this

instance the gain in 'tidiness' is the clarification of the 'sharp discontinuity between Modernist poetics and a certain range of contemporary practice' (p73) that the formula of the postmodernist ontological dominant brings to the more intuitive speculations of other literary historians. But, McHale insists, the clarification brought by the concept of the postmodernist ontological dominant should not be mistaken for an objective description of any wider societal changes. Its 'productivity', or usefulness, as a concept is limited to the discussion it promotes in the field of literary history:

> I further assume that the criterion of a good or superior definition is not its supposed approximation to some objective state of affairs "out there," but rather its productiveness. A superior definition produces new insights, new connections, coherence of a different degree or kind; ultimately, it produces more discourse, in the form of follow-up research, new interpretations, criticisms and refinements of the model, counter-proposals, polemics. The best definition of all will be the one that is productive in this way and also takes explicitly into account its own strategic character, the one that is selfconsciously rather than unconsciously strategic.
> (pp53-54)

While it may be argued that the exemplary self-reflexivity with which McHale theorises the concept of the postmodernist ontological dominant is itself a paradigmatic example of a transition from modernity to postmodernity, it is certain that his definition is offered explicitly not as an account of such a transition. The mistake of the editors of *The New Poetry* is to read McHale's highly provisional account of stylistic distinctions between modernist and postmodernist texts as a definitive statement of an epochal rupture between modernity and postmodernity. McHale's position is then tacitly conflated by Hulse, Kennedy, and Morley, with theoretical accounts such as Jameson's which do set out to analyse such a rupture. Consequently, throughout the introduction to the anthology, stylistic effects are read as indices of a generalised postmodern condition in which 'rhetorical forms and linguistic terms' become the expression of 'a realisation that ideas of meaning, truth and understanding are in themselves fictions' (p. 24). The editors of *The New Poetry* all too quickly read stylistic features as defining characteristics of a postmodern condition without pausing to think through in any detail what these claims might entail. Furthermore, their reliance upon McHale's suggestion of a change in dominant, from

epistemological to ontological concerns, involves a slippage in argument so that the postmodernist style they descibe becomes solely equated with the indeterminacies of an ontological uncertainty which effectively precludes the poetry from having anything other than a parodic engagement with the social and linguistic formation.

It is important, however, to note that this haste to read apparent shifts in poetic style as signs of a more general cultural shift towards postmodern indeterminacy is not a critical move new to this anthology but forms a part of a developing consensus in critical accounts of contemporary poetry. This tendency begins with the claim made by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* that 'the poets included here do represent a departure, one that may be said to exhibit something of the spirit of post-modernism'. (p20) Their suggestion has been extended by Alan Robinson in a discussion of two of the poets, James Fenton and Paul Muldoon, collected in Morrison and Motion's anthology. Muldoon's work, Robinson argues, displays a 'conscious opacity' which 'seems designed to mock the reader's pursuit of arcane significance, tempting one into comic excesses of overinterpretation [...] [it] parodies its own putative sententiousness, but also the over-ingenious hermeneutical probings of any critic who would see in poetry more than a game with language'.[34] Fenton's work is described as a 'ludic Postmodernism, which exultingly parades its own artifice and apparent senselessness in an implicit rejection of engagement. His polemical targets are the self-perpetuating ingenuity of the critical industry and also the seriousness of the High Modernist rage for order, which desired to elevate the imaginative structures of art to a socially redemptive role in an era of cultural disintegration' (p. 7). This is to say that the mistake of reading stylistic features of texts as indices of wider social and economic changes is compounded by a narrowed definition of what a postmodern poetics might entail. As Robinson puts it elsewhere in *Instabilities*, 'Postmodernist debunking of poetry's self-importance' stems from a 'desire to restrict the scope of poetry to ludic entertainment' (p. 36).

The introduction to *The New Poetry* is shot through with examples of such readings in which the formal attributes of a poet's work are reduced to instances

of an all pervaisive 'ludic' postmodernism. Glyn Maxwell's poetry, it is argued, 'exploits the possibilities of an untrustworthy "I"' (p. 22), and his 'mixing of registers, idioms and thematic provenances' are said to be characteristic of 'some of the strongest writers of the period' (p. 23). In this, the editors argue, Peter Reading is 'a true postmodern, [ ] happiest when he can manipulate reader expectation by contrasting tonality and subject, lofty style and squalid nastiness' (p. 23). John Ash's poetry is said to chart 'the terrain of cultural debris across which postmodern first persons, singular or plural, acting or narrating, have to make their way' (p. 23). A quotation from Ash's poem 'Casino' is offered as an example of the perambulations of the postmodern first person:

> There were always big sailing ships
> magnificent coldly maternal women
> or should I say there was always
> the large idea of sailing ships
> the anachronism of mysterious departures
> into a world too thoroughly discovered.
> In those days we came to the coast in winter.
> (pp23-24)

It is, however, the allusion to the 'Marie' passage in the opening section of *The Waste Land* rather than any attribute of this particular first person narration that attracts the notice of the editors. This 'flamboyantly bathetic misprision' is said to 'set the main Ash tone' of 'cultural spoofery' (p. 24). The tonal levity of 'social bizarrerie' (p. 23) that the editors detect in the work of Ash defines the 'postmodern' attitude of the poets collected in the anthology. Ash's 'cultural spoofery' is claimed to reappear in the work of Peter Didsbury, Frank Kuppner and Ian Duhig. Kuppner's 'A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty' is acclaimed as 'his off-beat masterpiece'. (p. 24) Glyn Maxwell's 'mixed registers' are also praised as 'remarkable for a self-conscious wit and an attack derived, paradoxically, from a relentless conceptualising of language that plays with misreadings, tautologies, insecurities and qualification' (p.22). Ian McMillan produces work, it is claimed, that 'is a unique combination of stand-up comedy and surrealism, in which language is treated with a healthy, postmodern disrespect' (p. 21).

The difficulty with this is not simply that the repetitions of the term 'postmodernism' and its equation with a playful self-consciousness render its

explicatory powers meaningless, but that the insistence upon the poets' fascination with an exploitation of the levity of the surface possibilities of linguistic effects negates the actual engagements the poetry makes with the social and linguistic determinations with which it is in negotiation. The editors' reflections on the work of Peter Reading provide a good example of this tendency.

In a discussion of his work with Alan Jenkins, Reading has said that:

> Art has always struck me most when it was to do with coping with things often hard things, things that are difficult to take [...] We all have a lack of sympathy, or we wouldn't be able to tick over. We're spared real grief by the impersonality of most affairs [...] There seems to be nothing but health-giving sanity in dealing with any issue that comes your way [...] There's a completely literal justification for my being, if you like, heartless and all that. I don't think there's anything to us, we're organisms, and that's ok [...] I hope I'm not essentially gloomy, that is to say regretful. But I feel total impotence.[35]

These comments indicate conflicting impulses that inform Reading's understanding of poetry. On the one hand, Reading's view of art and the artist, and of poetry and the poet in particular, seems to derive from the Greek and Latin roots of the verb to make, so that the poet is primarily an artificer or maker. The poet, like the lone singer in Wallace Stevens' 'The Idea of Order at Key West', 'is the single artificer of the world', whose 'rage for order' is 'The maker's rage to order words of the sea'.[36] The value of poetry resides in the order and meaning that the poet's imagination is able to impose through poetic form upon a chaotic and meaningless world. Poetry, it is suggested, enables human beings to cope with the raw materials of brute experience by the imposition of form. But Reading is sceptical of a too ready endorsement of either Romantic or Modernist notions of the conciliatory powers of the transcendent poetic imagination or the autotelic poetic object. The imaginative act of writing poetry, and the realised poem itself, are providers of 'health-giving sanity' in that they enable people to cope with their lot, and yet, Reading suggests, there is something duplicitous about the transaction. The coping mechanism of poetic form imposes a barrier of 'impersonality' between the poet, his or her audience, and experience which shields them from the 'real grief' of

the knowledge of the biological imperatives at the core of the human organism's existence. In this form enacts a moment of betrayal in the very process of enabling human beings to get on with their day to day existence by turning away from that true empathy with the human experience which would acknowledge the presence of death and decay in the midst of life.

These tensions are worked through in Reading's long poem *C*.[37] The C of the title is at once a euphemism for cancer, itself a metonym for the fragility of the human organism in the face of which Reading feels so impotent, and the announcement, through its signification of one hundred in the system of Roman numerals, of the poet's project to make '100 100-word units' with which to cope with the experiences of a fictionalised terminal cancer patient. The title thus enacts the tension that preoccupies Reading. It sets out the poetic project to contain the experiences of the dying cancer patient within the structure provided by an elaborate formal device, and it hints at the inadequacy of this project in that the formal units carry the same potency to ward off the encroaching terror of cancer as does the frankly pathetic euphemism, 'C'. A measure of Reading's assessment of the inadequacy of form to the task of coping with the devastation cancer can wreak upon the human body is given in the 91st 100-word unit:

> My fistulae ooze blood and stink,
> I vomit puce spawn in the sink,
> diarrhoea is exuded.
> Do not be deluded:
> mortality's worse than you think.
> You find the Limerick inapposite? Try the pretty
> Choriamb?
> Bed-sores without; swarm-cells within.
> Rancified puke speckles my sheets.
> Faeces spurt out quite uncontrolled
> into my bed, foetid and warm.
> Vomit of blood tasting of brass,
> streaked with green veins, splatters my face. (p. 108)

Hulse, Morley, and Kennedy, comment acutely of this passage that, 'The question that underlies these provocatively ironic demands touches upon the very relation of rhetorical form to experience' (p. 23). This is surely right, but they misread the force of the poem when they equate this questioning with Reading's supposed exemplary postmodernist attitudes, a sensibility that they argue sees

him at his 'happiest when he can manipulate reader expectation by contrasting tonality and subject, lofty style and squalid nastiness' (p. 23). The swiftness with which Hulse, Morley, and Kennedy, ascribe this 'mixing of registers' to their defining notion of postmodernism's levity of style undermines the examination of the relation of rhetorical form to experience that the poem makes.

Certainly this passage plays with tone and subject, but it is more than simply a witty 'postmodern' joke at the incommensurability of form and content. An initial reading would suggest that the limerick is clearly 'inapposite'. The humorous triviality of its rhyme scheme and the sing-song anapaests of its metrical arrangement, associated as they are with the 'witty obscenities of anonymous versifiers' seem to make a mockery of the grave subject of the poem.[38] The archaic and 'lofty style' of the 'pretty Choriamb', by contrast, seems to disdain the intensity of suffering recounted in the poem through its grounding in the arcane learning of classical metrics, a piece of feeble and pedantic scholastic window-dressing that fails absolutely to do justice to that suffering. However, on reflection it might be thought that humour, particularly the sort of 'gallows humour' that this limerick evokes, is a valid response to the intolerable burden of the struggle with terminal cancer that the poem articulates. Equally, the choice of the choriamb might not seem so inappropriate when it is learnt that, according to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, it is associated with the classical Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. Seen in the context of the mythic grandeur and suffering of the Oedipus legend, the choriamb seems less the choice of the pedant and more a dignified attempt to find a form that would convey the tragedy of the human organism's susceptibility to cancer.[39]

At a slightly different angle of approach, it could be argued that the relation of form to content is problematised further in this passage by the dissonance introduced to the limerick form by the elision of a syllable in each of the first two lines. Whereas the comic pulse of the limerick calls for three anapaests, totalling nine syllables, in order to create the characteristic three stress line, the first two lines of this limerick have only eight syllables. Although in spoken performance the force of the limerick's rhythmic pulse imposes a three stress line, the absence

of the missing syllable introduces the faintest garbled quality to the rendition. It is as though the malignant shadow of cancer lurks hidden within the form itself, poised to disturb the claim of the humorous rhythm of the limerick to displace the horror of its content.

Tone and subject, then, clash, but the effect of this is more than a symptom of postmodern 'cultural spoofery'. The pause that these reflections provide indicate the complex examination into the relation between form and experience that this poem is concerned with. Such an examination of the relation of form to experience recurs throughout the poem. Although in the 1st 100-word unit we are told, 'Verse is for healthy/ arty-farties. The dying/ and surgeons use prose', (p59) neither the perfectly performed haiku here, nor the incessant juggling with verse forms throughout the remaining 99 units, should simply be read as a spoof of the pretensions of poetry. It is not just poetry that is shown to be inadequate to the task of measuring the intensity of suffering and anguish experienced by a terminal cancer patient. Prose, too, is suspect. In the 91st word unit, as we have seen, the limerick and the choriamb are compared as to their aptness in describing the vomiting brought on by the cancer and its treatment. However, completing the 100 words of the unit is a fragment of prose:

> In vomiting, the glottis closes, the soft palate rises and the abdominal muscles contract, expelling the stomach contents. In nausea, the stomach relaxes and there is reverse peristalsis in the duodenum. (p. 108)

The verse/prose opposition seems to break down here, as the clinical and precise language of the medical textbook fails equally to do justice to the horror of cancer. In fact, during the course of the poem there is hardly a form of language, from the homilies of vernacular wisdom through the specialised discourses of science and medicine, to the certainties of religion, that is not shown to be entirely inadequate in its attempt encapsulate the horror of this experience. And yet the formal drive of the poem, its compulsion to make 100 100-word units is a constant reminder of the 'rage for order', in the face of the flux of experience, upon which human sanity depends. The matter is addressed directly in the 73rd unit:

> Some of us benefit from a self-shielding shunning of awful
> thoughts about dying and, worse, physical pain at the end.
>
> Nevertheless we are conscious of being falsely deluding,
> when we say jauntily 'Oh! I shall be out of here soon!'
>
> Adequate realization of what is truly awaiting
> does not prevent us from this: never admitting we *know*.
>
> Even though sometimes I talk about this abdominal cancer,
> my mental ease demands lies, comfort of make-believe games –
>
> such as this one that I play now in distich, almost pretending
> verse has validity. No. Verse is fuck-all use here, now. (p. 98)

At the end of the last 100 word unit it is impossible to tell which side of this dialectical oscillation between an affirmation of the need for form and the recognition that form is always inadequate to experience wins out. Although the last sentence concludes, 'My wife patiently washes my faece-besmirched pyjamas, for *prosaic* love' (p. 113), the fact that this insistence upon the inadequacy of verse form marks the completion of the ambitious formal endeavour to write 100 100-word units means that the contrary argument of the 98th unit continues to have some resonance:

> No. Something more prosy
> for this job. The morphine,
> the colostomy - fuck-all
> there is justify lyric/metre.
> But some structure still?
> Why? Dignity? - bollocks.
> But some structure still,
> incongruously...
> 100 units each of 100 words.
> How about that? Neat. One unit
> per day for 100 final days (p. 112)

Such a sustained problematisation of the relation between form and experience pushes far beyond the play with reader expectations that Hulse, Morley, and Kennedy suggest. Indeed, if that were all that was at stake the joke would have worn pretty thin by the end of the poem. On the contrary, it seems to me that from the questioning of the relation of form to experience found in *C* stem a series of problems that preoccupy contemporary poetry's attempt to think through the relation of knowledge to experience. The collapse of this

exploration, by Hulse, Morley, and Kennedy, into an instance of postmodern levity of style is to deny the important social and political imperatives that are in question. This avoidance of central political and social questions can be further illustrated by an analysis of Reading's *Ukulele Music*.[40]

As in *C*, *Ukulele Music* is concerned with the question of the extent to which poetry is an adequate means of coping with experience. One of the ways in which this theme is addressed is through the figure of a sea captain who recounts tales of extreme suffering and hardship during his time at sea. The Captain's yarns are often fanciful and comically hyperbolic, but their point seems to lie in their attempt to make sense of chaotic and calamitous experience. The suggestion seems to be that the Captain's stories function, like poetry, to bring order to experience. The parallel is made explicit through the Captain's telling of how, when faced with disaster at sea, sailors sing songs:

> So with us at sea,
> for, whatever calamity
> we meet with, we hope for some
> chance opportunity
> to indemnify our losses.
> And shall it, now, be counted
> as ye dignified defiance
> in us towards our fateful
> merciless element,
> or gull naivete,
> cousin to recklessness,
> that, e'en in pitching Gulphward,
> our salt kind brings forth chanteys? (p. 148)

As in *C*, however, the thrust of the argument in *Ukulele Music* seems to be that to sing songs, and by extension to make poems, in the face of adversity is indeed to court duped naivete. This idea is extended through the ukulele music of the poem's title, which appears throughout in recurring references to the Music Hall song in which a man is presented as playing a ukulele as the ship he is sailing upon sinks, and through what appear to be extracts from a 'Teach-Yourself to Play the Ukulele' manual. If, in the Captain's sea stories, we are invited to link the writing of poetry with the making of music, both in the defiance of disaster, then in the rest of the poem we are asked to equate the writing of poetry with fiddling while Rome burns. An instance of this sort of despondency at the

impotency of poetry is provided early on in the poem where the sea-faring metaphor crosses over from the comedic antics of the deluded Captain to make a point about the relationship of poetry to society. The poem opens with a catalogue of examples that testify to the breakdown of society. Children are reported spitting at an old lady out shopping (p. 122), and youths are seen to mug a young mother before taking gratuitous pleasure in mutilating her baby (pp. 118-119). But, the poem comments:

> Stubbornly, Taffs, at their damn-fool anachronistic
> eisteddfods,
> still, with this breach in the hull, twang
> (ineffectual lyres). (p. 123)

The example is itself gratuitous. The Eisteddfod is a literary festival that deliberately and self-consciously exploits its anachronisms, and, possibly, these lines betray an impatience with Celtic literariness akin to the peculiarly 'English' hostility of Movement poets towards the linguistic excesses of Dylan Thomas. But their suggestion is clear. When the ship of state is in trouble, poetry is as inadequate a response to social dislocation as to sing shanties. In fact, this slur upon the Welsh Bards is perhaps justified in that the music of their 'ineffectual lyres' links with the equally ineffectual ukulele music which is the poem's constant refrain. The point is made in a passage from the crazed ramblings of the Captain in which the metaphor of the ship of state is combined with the language of the 'Teach Yourself' to play the ukulele manual and the basic terms of metrical composition:

> Wend your luff, messmates, and let go the skysail halliards,
> mister,
> cut the brace pennants and stays, reef the fore-topgallant in,
>
> falling barometer, send down the skysail yard from aloft, sir,
> strum with felt pick back and forth, lightly across all four strings
>
> all sail should be double-gasketted, stow the mainsail and cross-
> jack,
> make yr pentameters taut: two-and-a-half feet times two,
>
> bend ye now three lower storm-staysails and a storm spanker,
> mister
> take in the three upper tops, close-reef the foresail, F sharp,
>
> tighten the B string and place finger at the back of the second

fret of the A string and keep spondees and dactyls close-clewed,

trim yr heroic hexameter (or it may be dactylic),
splice the pentameter aft, finger yr frets as ye go (p. 160)

To the Captain's delirious mind the skills of sea-manship, as well as musical and metrical composition, add up to an heroic encounter with experience, but the poem refuses to linger in the comfort of his 'heroic hexameter'. At its close the claims of music and poetry are collapsed into the absurd graphemic representation of the dactyls and spondees of the Ukelele's ludicrous twang:

plinkplinka/plinkplinka/plinkplinka/plinkplink/
plinkplinka/plinkplink
plinkplinka/plinkplinka/plonk//plinkplinka/plinkplinka/plonk
(p. 165)

In both *C* and *Ukulele Music* poetry is treated with suspicion because its music can offer a deluded sense of comfort in a hostile world. In both its Romantic and Modernist modes poetry offers a vision of transcendence, the dream that somehow things might be better. Reading ruthlessly debunks this aspect of poetic yearning in order to insist upon the brutal reality of contemporary society and to negate the ever present danger of poetry's inherent idealism mistaking a vision of reconciliation for actual reconciliation in a recalcitrantly unreconciled world. The Captain in *Ukulele Music*, however distantly, echoes and satirises Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. The 100 100-word units of *C* deride the formalisms of twentieth century poetics. Furthermore, the satirically empty sounds of the graphemic representation of ukulele music mocks the negative critique of avant-garde poetics from DaDa to post-structuralist valorisations of the material signifier.

Measured against this reduction of poetry to the status of muzak accompanying the disintegration of society, Reading's stated sense of impotence is hardly surprising. And yet, although the utopian yearning of the poetic must be kept in check, the significance of the poetic endeavour to find forms adequate to experience is greater than Reading's despair at his own impotence would initially seem to admit. In the next chapter I will discuss the way in which Roy Fisher's poem 'It is Writing' enacts an exemplary mediation between poetic hope

and prosaic realism as it addresses the problem of the relation of poetic form to experience.

Endnotes

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[2] *The New British Poetry 1968-1988*, ed. by Gillian Allnutt et al (London: Paladin, 1988).
[3] Lillian Mohin (ed.), *One Foot On The Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry, 1969-1979*. (London: Only Women Press, 1979). Claire Buck, 'Poetry and the Women's Movement in Postwar Britain', in, *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 81-111, (p. 81).
[4] James Berry (ed.), *News for Babylon*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984). Barbara Burford (ed.). *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets*. (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1985).
[5] *A Various Art*, ed. by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987; Reprinted, London: Paladin, 1990). My references will be to the 1990 edition.
[6] Lee Harwood, *Crossing the Frozen River: Selected Poems* (London: Paladin, 1988); Tom Raworth, *Tottering State: Selected Poems 1963-1987* (London: Paladin, 1988); Iain Sinclair, *Flesh Eggs & Scalp Metal: Selected Poems 1970-1987* (London: Paladin, 1989); Douglas Oliver, *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm: Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: Paladin, 1990); *Future Exiles: Three London Poets Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths, Brian Catling* (London: Paladin, 1992); *Ghosts in the Corridor: Andrew Crozier, Donald Davie, C.H. Sisson* (London: Paladin, 1992); *The Tempers of Hazard: Thomas A. Clark, Barry MacSweeney, Chris Torrance* (London: Paladin, 1993).
[7] *Conductors of Chaos: A Poetry Anthology* ed. by Iain Sinclair, (London: Picador, 1996).
[8] *Penguin Modern Poets Volume 10: Douglas Oliver, Denise Riley, Iain Sinclair* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996).
[9] Roy Fisher, *The Dow Low Drop: New and Selected Poems*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996); Douglas Oliver, *Penniless Politics*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994); Douglas Oliver, *A Salvo for Africa* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000); Barry MacSweeney, *The Book of Demons* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1997); J.H. Prynne. *Poems*. (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1999).
[10] Romana Huk, in Acheson and Huk, p.3; Terry Eagleton, 'Comment,' *Poetry Review* 79.4 (1989-90), p. 46.
[11] Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993).
[12] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
[13] Sean O'Brien, pp. 18-19.
[14] John Osborne, in *Poetry Review*, 83. 2 (1993), p. 9.

[15] Edwin Morgan in *Poetry Review*, 83. 2 (1993), p. 11.
[16] O'Brien, *The Firebox*, pp.xxvii-xxviii.
[17] Robert Crawford. *Devolving English Literature*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 305.
[18] Armitage and Crawford, pp. xx-xxv.
[19] *A Consultative Green Paper on Support for Poetry in the English Arts Funding System*. (London: Arts Council of England, 1997), Appendix 3, p. 31.
[20] Marjorie Perloff, 'What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Poetry: Some Aporias Of Literary Journalism', *PN Review*, 115 (1997), 16-24 (p. 22).
[21] Armitage and Crawford, p. xviiii.
[22] Tim Kendall, 'Sins of Omission Brought to Book', *Guardian, Saturday Review*, 6 March, 1999, p. 9.
[23] William Scammell, 'Needed: Critical Svengalis and Mad Ezras', *Independent on Sunday, Culture*, 18 October 1998, p. 13.
[24] Kendall, p. 9.
[25] Harry Clifton, 'Big-Endians and Little-Endians', in *Poetry Review*, 88. 3 (1998).
[26] Peter Forbes, in *Poetry Review*, 83. 2 (1993), p. 3.
[27] Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 3.
[28] Brian McHale, 'Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing', in *Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature*, 21 *Approaching Postmodernism*, (1986), 53-79, (pp. 58-60).
[29] Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 27.
[30] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed., by Hal Foster, (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p.113.
[31] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: verso, 1991), p. 4.
[32] McHale, p.56.
[33] Roman Jakobson, in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1971), p. 108.
[34] Alan Robinson, *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 7.
[35] Peter Reading, in *Poetry Review*, 75, April, 1985.
[36] Wallace Stevens, *Selected Poems*, ed., by Holly Stevens, (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 98.
[37] Peter Reading, *3 in 1: Diplopic, C, Ukulele Music*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), pp. 55-113.
[38] Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Oxford: OUP, 1990), p. 122.
[39] *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed., by Alex Preminger et al, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 200.
[40] Peter Reading, *3 in 1*, pp. 115-165.

Chapter Four: Beyond the False Binary

In the first three chapters of this thesis I have traced the map of contemporary British poetry as it has been drawn by several key anthologies. In Chapter One I have shown how, despite superficial differences, a narrow orthodoxy was defined by *New Lines*, *The New Poetry*, and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. Chapter Two describes the revisionist response to this narrow orthodoxy as illustrated by *The New British Poetry*. In Chapter Three I show how Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*, *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, and *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since1945*, illustrate a process of rapprochement in which the mainstream responds to the accusations of exclusivity levelled against it by attempting to expand its boundaries to include examples of poetries previously excluded.

Each of these chapters identifies an aspect of what I am describing as the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry. Chapter One describes how mainstream poetry is exclusionary, and how that exclusivity functions through the dominant model of representation that places the lyric voice at the centre of the poem. Chapter Two describes how a radical alliance between identity poetries and formally innovative poetries is thrown into crisis by the conflicting ways in which the politics of identity and the politics of formal innovation respond to the dominant model of representation. Chapter Three describes the way in which the much acclaimed triumph of postmodern plurality fails to make good its promise of a truly representative account of the post-war period. It also marks the turn in my argument away from a description of the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry and towards a discussion of its significance. I argue that the poetry of Peter Reading demonstrates a concern with the problematic of the relationship between poetic form and experience that is of far more significance than the claims made for his 'true postmodern' style by the editors of *The New Poetry*. In the following chapters of this thesis I will argue that the problematic relationship between poetic form and experience can offer a way beyond the impasse of the 'family row' in post-war poetry.

The crux of the matter, I will suggest, turns on the accurate observation made by Clair Wills, in *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*, that the 'discussion of the politics of form in contemporary poetry is caught in a false binarism, between on the one hand 'traditional' lyric [...] and on the other 'experimental' or avant-garde poetry'.[1] As I have shown in Chapter Two, Wills describes, in 'Contemporary women's poetry: experimentalism and the expressive voice', how this opposition sets up 'a familiar division between formally conservative poetic practices' and 'radical experimental "artifice"'. Conservative poetics 'do not question the drive towards romantic modes of self-expression, the "poetic" voice, or the centre of the poem as a speaking "I"'. Experimental poetry, on the other hand, 'is defined as poetry which in its formal mechanisms recognises the primacy of language over thematic concerns, and at the same time deconstructs the possibility of a coherent or consistent lyric voice'.[2]

I agree with Wills that this distinction between expressive and experimental poetry is a false binarism. Wills seeks a way beyond the opposition by arguing for 'a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the function of particular literary forms'.[3] She argues that lyric poetry derives much of its power from 'the romantic ideal of poetic authenticity and personal sincerity, which enables the poet to find a voice beyond his or her individual concerns'.[4] In her study of Northern Irish poetry Wills is able to deconstruct this romantic poetics of authenticity by attending to the ways in which the relationship between the public and private spheres are problematised by the particularities of the post-colonial situation on the island of Ireland. Similarly, in her discussion of contemporary women's poetry, Wills is able to undermine romantic notions of authenticity by examining the way in which social and cultural changes at the end of the twentieth century have meant that women have experienced 'a radical transformation of the relations between the public sphere of work and politics, and the private sphere of individual experience and family life'.[5] I will set out Wills's argument at some length since her analysis will be of considerable importance in my discussion of the significance of the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry.

As I argued in Chapter Three, from the point of view of a poetics that articulates a collective political programme the radical calling into question of the possibility of a representational politics mounted by the preoccupation of formal innovators with the materiality of language is dangerously apolitical. Conversely, from the perspective of the adherents of formal innovation, the deployment by the poetries informed by a commitment to identity politics of the first person in a strategy of collective identification is complicit with the lyric mode of mainstream poetics and does not afford any possibility of political transformation. Clair Wills's important contribution to the overcoming of this impasse is to reject the binary opposition between, on the one hand, a radical poetics of formal innovation, and on the other, a conservative formal adherence to romantic modes of the lyric self:

> What I want to suggest is that current discussion of the politics of form in contemporary poetry is caught in a false binarism, between on the one hand 'traditional' lyric, which while it may carry a political content belies its message through its slavery to conventional forms, and on the other 'experimental' or avant-garde poetry, which in its conscious problematisation of language itself forgoes political content in favour of linguistic counterconventions, a rejection of the authoritative lyric voice, a destabilization of meaning. (*Improprieties* p. 48)

Wills' deconstruction of this false binary allows her to analyse a broad range of contemporary British poetry in a way that brings out the political imperatives of both the poetics of experimetalism and identity politics. In *Improprieties* she is able to demonstrate that three poets working within the specific historical situatedness of Northern Ireland (Mebh McGuckian, Tom Paulin, and Paul Muldoon) despite their shared use of the lyric self, and despite all of them having been anthologised in the key mainstream anthology *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, deploy the 'I' in ways that open up the lyric self to political interrogation. Conversely, in the article 'Contemporary women's poetry: experimentalism and the expressive voice' she is able to show that two linguistic innovators (the British poet Denise Riley, and the American poet Lyn Hejinian) do not sacrifice political engagement to experimentalism. Significantly the rapprochement achieved here is secured through an analysis of how both in the work of the Northern Irish poets and in the work of Riley and Hejinian the linguistic and social determinations of the self are explored.

In *Improprieties* Wills begins her reading of Northern Irish poetry with an analysis of McGuckian, Paulin, and Muldoon in order to explain exactly why it is a mistake to suppose that a poetry that deploys the lyric self is necessarily conservative. She discusses the work of McGuckian and Muldoon in relation to the critical framework that would see it as paradigmatic of the ludic postmodernism that Morrison and Motion describe in the introduction to their anthology. As Wills argues, critics such as Alan Robinson, and Morrison and Motion, are mistaken to read formal disjunction as simply a symptom of the wider postmodern condition:

> [They] all suggest that the 'obliqueness' and 'relativism' of current poetic forms have their roots in the changed nature of society, which has destroyed all faith in the Enlightenment values of truth and progress. However, by interpreting the significance of poetic form as the result of changing social formations, liberal critics such as Morrison and Motion concur with Habermas's pessimistic view about the loss of culture's civilizing role, since the public discussion of poetry is seen as collapsing inaccessibly into private narratives. (p. 76)

Against this Wills argues that the dislocations encountered in the work of McGuckian, Muldoon, and Paulin, are not directed inwards towards the hermeticism of the private, or to the radical alterity of the incommensurable 'differand', but outwards in a specific engagement with the particularity of the post-colonial situation in Northern Ireland:

> [T]his poetry, even at its most obscure and enigmatic, is not simply seceding from the public realm of a degenerate consumerist culture into an area of pseudo-privacy. The refusal of communication, the resistance to interpretation, the parody of privacy through secrecy is directed outwards. At a more fundamental level what I am arguing for is a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the function of particular literary forms. For the fragmentation of historical narrative, and the parody of public or official forms of discourse have a very specific function in colonial and post-colonial cultures; they are not necessarily, or not only, the signs of a global postmodernism. (p. 76)

Wills, I believe, is correct to make a clear distinction between the work of McGuckian and Muldoon on the one hand and Morrison and Motion's putative

postmoderns on the other. The work of McGuckian and Muldoon is inexorably linked to the specificity of the situation in Northern Ireland and can not therefore be linked more generally to a wider postmodern condition without regard to that political and historical particularity. Importantly Wills claims that the work of McGuckian, Muldoon, and Paulin, if it is read through the grid of its historical and political situatedness, can be seen to challenge the definition of the lyric upon which readings which have seen Northern Irish poetry as achieving aesthetic resolutions to a political conflict are based. She argues that the work of these poets questions the authenticity of both myth and private experience, and examines the interdependence of the public and the private spheres. By doing so 'the poetry forces a reassessment of the status of the lyric, and of the notion of privacy on which it depends' (p. 46).

Wills's key claim, then, in relation to these poets is that although they use the lyric self they do so in ways that undermine its authority by using form to question the function of 'representation and representativeness' (p. 48). I will briefly sketch the ways in which she sees these poets as accomplishing this task.

Wills relates the work of Paulin to that of the dominant tradition, the 'well-made Movement Lyric, with its aesthetic of "privacy"' (p. 53). Wills's central claim for Paulin is that rather than inheriting the aesthetic privacy of the Movement lyric, or simply manipulating the ironies of postmodern style (as he has been read by Morrison and Motion when they included him in their anthology), Paulin's post-colonial situatedness instead means that his work questions the grounds of representation (artistic and political) and thereby interrogates the politics of representation and the position of the lyric self:

> The connection [between the inherent duplicity or ambiguity of language and the failure of representative politics in Northern Ireland] turns on the necessity, both in representative politics and poetic representation, for dialogue and consensus, neither of which can be initiated from a position of pretence [...] Paulin calls both aesthetic and democratic forms of representation into question since both lack the moral and rational consensus necessary as a precondition for communication. So the poem ['Now for the Orange Card'] is about the failure of the public arena, and consequently of a public political poetry which would address it'. (pp. 142-143)

Wills's contention is that Paulin works through the ideas of the Enlightenment project, and that his goal is the achievement of rational consensus. However, in the post-colonial situation in Northern Ireland consensus is clearly not a part of the lived experience of the Province. Paulin's poetry rather than offering an aesthetic resolution to the structural dislocations of the Northern Irish polity (via the play of ludic postmodernism, the hermeticism of High Modernism, or the transcendence of the romantic lyric self), offers an analysis of how the self is fractured by these dislocations, and by so doing offers a critique of those political and aesthetic projects that would seek the illusion of consensus without the hard work of achieving it.

The claims that Wills makes for the work of McGuckian are similar to those that she makes for Paulin. The formally innovative poet Wendy Mulford has criticised McGuckian for using the lyric voice of the dominant tradition in a way that is 'tied to a familiar poetics, in which language is not seen to be problematic'.[6] But Wills argues that this is not the case:

> My counter-claim would be that whatever McGuckian intends by her use of the expressive voice, her work brings us no nearer to an understanding of her personal experience of femininity and motherhood - what it does instead is what is so often claimed for experimental poetry - it problematizes the communicative function of poetic language, and thereby questions the grounds for reaching consensus, and the boundaries of the public sphere itself. (p. 49)

The characteristic obliqueness of McGuckian's work problematises the communicative function by foregrounding 'disarticulation' (p.191). Disarticulation is the result of McGuckian's lyric demonstrating the interdepedence of the public and the private:

> The obscurity and indeterminacy of McGuckian's poetry [...] parodies the very idea of a private or intimate domain; instead of intimacy we are confronted with secrecy, a refusal to offer the narrative up for inspection, and at the same time we are stalked by the nagging suspicion - as a historical narrative is glimpsed in fragmented form through the articulation of intimate body parts - that these are not private narratives anyway, but political allegories'. (pp75-76)

Neither the (male) public sphere nor the (female) private sphere are allowed their authenticating autonomy. Instead the privacy of the traditional female domain is parodied as its retreat from the transparency of public discourses topples over into the opacity of an apparently secret (female) mode which yet contains echoes of (male) public narratives because in Ireland (as in many allegories of the Nation) the Nation is figured through figures of the mother. The self is shown to be traversed by both the public and the private, neither of which can claim any authenticating priority over the other: 'Thus, despite the intimate focus of the work, poetic form in McGuckian's work is very far from acting as an aesthetic refuge, instead it serves to challenge redemptive approaches to everyday life [...] the poems lack a fundamental ingredient of the refuge - a stable and secure centre, a grounding for the authenticity of personal experience.' (p191) Rather than clinging to the authority of the individual voice as Mulford claims, McGuckian's work demonstrates the problematics of language, and the complex, interwoven, identifications subjects make through it. Like Paulin's work it offers no illusionary concilations but rather dramatises the negotiation of the self with the discourses that surround and traverse it within the context of the political and social situation of Northern Ireland.

The work of Paul Muldoon offers Clair Wills's final account of why it is a mistake to assume that the use of the first person is necessarily a conservative gesture. As with Paulin and McGuckian, Wills argues that it is Muldoon's interrogation of the boundaries between the public and the private spheres in the context of the situation in Northern Ireland that opens his use of the first person beyond the sterility of the dominant tradition's use of the lyric self:

> At issue here is the by now familiar question of the relation drawn in the poetry between public (national, civic, or communal) and private (familial or perhaps individual) registers. I have discussed [...] the characteristic association in discussions of Northern Irish poetry of poetic responsibility to the political situation with the poet's ability to open the privacy of the lyric up to more communal concerns. I argued that this process depends on a notion of representativeness which in turn derives from the romantic ideal of poetic authenticity and personal sincerity, which enables the poet to find a voice beyond his or her individual concerns. In Muldoon's work, however, the private sphere remains irreducibly private, it narrows to the point at which it

> becomes incommunicable, and loses all possible relevance it might have to more public concerns. (p. 198)

Furthermore, the irreducibly private realm of Muldoon's work does not only refuse the possibility of opening up to meet communal concerns but it calls in question the reliability, the authenticity, of private experience. By submitting public narratives to the radical decentering of this inflection through an irreducibly private subjectivity, Muldoon calls in question both the authenticity of the public and the private realms. His is a poetics of suspicion which, Wills argues in a gesture reminiscent of Jerome McGann's claims for Byron's influence on the work of the Language poets, offers the foregrounding of poetic artifice in Byronic distrust of the claims of factual and personal fidelity to the 'truth'[7]:

> Muldoon's work does not depend on a notion of the 'true', a concept he always treats with suspicion. The self-conscious rhetorical form of the work undermines the aura of authenticity and sincerity necessary for the reader's belief in the truth claim inherent in poetic statements. Both vatic and propagandistic theories of poetic discourse are rejected, in favour of the membership of the 'society of false faces'...the suggestion that, rather than authentic or natural principles, personal identities and political processes are both equally constructed, dependent on accident and historical contingency for their fabrication, suggests the possibility of changing their structure. Hence, despite Muldoon's, suspicion of the value of transformative politics, his own work bears a liberatory potential. (pp. 234-235)

Wills's discussion of the work of Paulin, McGuckian and Muldoon demonstrates that it is not the case that a poetry that works through the first person is necessarily conservative. Importantly, her discussion indicates that what is at issue is not simply the use of the first person but its relation to the dominant lyric mode which feeds off the privacy of the self to encode the romantic lyric space of the autonomous sovereign subject possessed of the ability to universalise human experience. The first person need not merely instantiate this imaginary universalist subject position but may in fact dramatise the process of negotiation through which the self is constructed. Having established this point, I now want to turn to Wills' article, 'Contemporary women's poetry: experimentalism and the expressive voice', which offers a consideration of the

deconstruction of the lyric self as evidenced by the work of women poets working within the tradition of formal innovation.

As we have seen, Wills proposes that recent accounts of contemporary British poetry offer a crude binary opposition as a guide to interpretation. On the one hand there is said to exist the dominant tradition of formally conservative poetic practices 'which do not question the drive towards romantic modes of self-expression, the poetic 'voice', or the centre of the poem as a speaking 'I'' (p. 34). On the other hand, and in contrast to the 'transparency' of the dominant poetry, there exists the poetics of formal experimentation: 'This is defined as poetry which in its formal mechanisms recognises the primacy of language over thematic concerns, and at the same time deconstructs the possibility of the formation of a coherent lyric voice' (p. 35). By describing in detail the substance of Wills' discussion of the work of Paulin, McGuckian, and Muldoon, I have set out the limitations of the first half of this binary. I want to now work through the limitations of the second part of the binary opposition by following Wills' discussion of formal experimentation.

Wills's contention is that, rather than as we might expect from the positions taken up by poets and critics working within this tradition, the first person is not in fact abandoned wholesale by formal innovators. Contrary to Wendy Mulford's claim that the poetics of formal innovation 'resigns the authority of the individual poetic voice',[8] Wills argues that the experimental tradition in general, and the work of Hejinian and Riley in particular, offers a dramatisation of the processes involved in the negotiation of a subject position within contemporary society. That is to say, she implicitly endorses the claim made by Peter Middleton that, 'far from rejecting the expressive self [the tradition of formal innovation] actually gives it much play, negotiating complex tensions between the pronouns of self, community and state'.[9]

As with Wills' account of the Northern Irish poets discussed above, her point of intervention here is to focus on the way in which formally innovative poetry explores the relationship between the public and the private realms. As we have seen, one of Wills' important claims has been that the autonomy of the lyric self,

and its appeal to universal human value, derives from its purchase on the authenticity of private experience. This is, of course, a romantic gesture that was paraded in the Wordsworthian 'egotistical sublime'. In the dominant tradition of contemporary poetry it persists in the 'nostalgia for diminished being' described by Andrew Crozier. However, this romanticism is also evident, if only in attenuated form, in the hermeticism of the aesthetic retreat of High Modernism.

> The great modernisms were [...] predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body [...] this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style.[10]

The difficulty with these romantic and modernist conceptions of the lyric self is that they are precisely ahistorical and apolitical. The lyric's claim upon universal human value is derived from its removal from history and politics via the authenticity of individual experience. However, as Wills demonstrated through her readings of Paulin, McGuckian, and Muldoon, the authenticity of the private sphere in the Northern Irish context can be shown to be a fiction because of the ways in which allegories of the Nation (public) draw upon the figure of the Mother (private). My contention is that the dominant tradition in contemporary British poetry persists in the fiction of the autonomous self, if only in diminished form. Wills's suggestion is that beyond these positions which cling to the authenticity of the private there are two ways of thinking about the erosion of the possibility of retreat into lyric privacy. Both of these involve drawing upon the social and cultural shifts that have taken place since the mid-century, the movement from modernism to postmodernism that invalidates an appeal to the aestheticism of High Modernism and which, as Wills points out, have entailed 'a radical transformation of the relations between the public sphere of work and politics, and the private sphere of individual experience and family life' (p. 38).

The first of these rethinkings calls such lyric privacy into question via an analysis of the impact of the success of the political and civil rights campaigns of previously marginalised groups upon the cultural centre ground. It sees

postmodernism, as a crisis of authority in the West. Edward Said has argued that this crisis in authority is first witnessed in Western modernism. Modernism represents a crisis in the Western arts, its dislocations are a response to that historical moment in which the feminist and post-colonial movements began to challenge the hegemonic Western discourses of phallocentrism, and the supremacy of the white, Eurocentric male:

> Europe and the west [...] were being asked to take the Other seriously. This, I think, is the fundamental historical problem of modernism. The subaltern and the constitutively different suddenly achieved disruptive articulation exactly where in European culture silence and compliance could previously be depended on to quiet them down.[11]

Andreas Huyssen has developed this account of modernism as a crisis in Western representations of the Other in order to argue that its distinctive modes, for instance its rigid distinction between high and low art, derive precisely from this crisis of how to represent previously silenced and invisible subjectivities. The autotelic high modernist work of art becomes the last bastion of authenticity for the male artist against the ravages of commodified popular culture constructed as a feminine horror:

> Thus the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the 'wrong' kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture [...] The problem is not the desire to differentiate between forms of high art and depraved forms of mass culture and its co-options. The problem is rather the persistent gendering as feminine of that which is devalued.[12]

Huyssen goes on to suggest that postmodernism's break with modernism is a function of the dissolution of the divide between high and popular culture instigated by feminism's critique of both. In particular, 'After the feminist critique of the multilayered sexism in television, Hollywood, advertising, and rock' n' roll, the lure of the old rhetoric simply does not work any longer' (p. 62). Furthermore, the binary opposition between high and low art is shown to be non-sensical from the point of view of a minority culture:

> it is precisely the recent self-assertion of minority cultures and their emergence into public consciousness which has undermined the modernist belief that high and low culture have to be

> categorically kept apart; such rigorous segregation simply does not make much sense within a given minority culture which has always existed outside in the shadow of the dominant culture.
> (p. 194)

This, then, is an account of postmodernism that defines the term through the success of the politics of identity of previously marginalised groups. As the political successes of these groups undermine modernism's gendered binary opposition between high and popular culture, so they destabilise other gendered bianaries. If the high modernist work of art preserved the authenticity of the male subject from the ravages of the feminine culture industry, then the undermining of its elitist presumption to the status of high culture also destabilises the public/private binary upon which its authenticity depends. Wills argues that 'Postmodernist claims for the importance of much contemporary feminist literature often point to the breakdown of the boundaries between public and private spheres as the significant feminist contribution to the postmodern critique of representation'. (p40) This understanding of postmodernism amounts to a restating of the position taken up by Wills in *Improprieties* that the politics of the first person, if properly contextualised, need not be thought of as conservative. There it was argued that the use of the first person by Paulin, McGuckian, and Muldoon, when read in the light of the political and social situation in Northern Ireland, can be seen to dramatise the negotiation of a subject position rather than as an appeal to lyric privacy. Here it is argued that the use of the first person by Adrienne Rich is as part of a commitment to the politics of feminism:

> Despite her investment in 'experience', a poet such as Adrienne Rich may [...] be understood as undermining the 'privacy' of the experiential world through creating representative narratives, explorations of her own complex identity with which the reader can identify and thereby alter the horizons of her own perceptions. This process becomes clearer if we focus on the status of rhetorical discourse in contemporary poetry. In terms of feminist poetry this can be defined as a performance which makes an appeal to emotion, but it is neither simply natural or personal; it is a political strategy dependent on identification. (p. 40)

Modernism represents the last angst ridden appearance of the universal subject of bourgeois Western art. Postmodernism, and the identity politics associated

with it on this definition, represents the dissolution of the binary oppositions (high/low culture, public/private) that kept the universal subject in place, and the use of the first person is no longer an appeal to authenticity but a rhetorical strategy within a political struggle.

The second way of thinking about the erosion of the authenticating space of lyric privacy argues that such privacy has been hollowed out by the increased penetration of mass mediated technologies during the second half of the century. Wills offers Marjorie Perloff's account of the work of the American 'Language' poets as an example of this markedly different definition of postmodernism. Perloff's *Radical Artifice* provides a useful introduction to the poetries that have come loosely to be described as 'Language Poetry'.[13] She argues that there has been a Romantic persistence in American poetics through Modernism and into the poetries of the second half of the Twentieth Century. Citing Wordsworth's assertion in the 1800 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* that the poet is first and foremost 'a man speaking to men' she traces the persistence of this poetic credo through manifestos and statements from Eliot to the Beats and Projectivists. However, she asserts that the longed for authenticity of a 'natural' speech based poetics has been subject to constant erosion by the ravages of industrialisation and the growth of mass mediated society, pointing out that even at the moment of formulation of the Romantic ideal of a speech based poetics in Wordsworth's 'Preface' there is an uneasy acknowledgement of mediation in the 'multitude of causes, unknown to former times, now acting with combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind'.[14] The increasingly vociferous insistence of the Beats and Projectivists of the necessity for a poetics of pure speech, 'of the breathing of the man who writes'[15] represents, she claims, the final crisis of speech based poetics in the face of the exponential advance on all fronts of mass communications. By the 1970s the speech act has become so entirely mediated that it is palpably no longer in any sense 'natural', and citing the example of a statement made by Robert Grenier in 1970, Perloff argues that radical American poetry aware of its contemporaneity finally turns its back on its Romantic inheritance:

> Why imitate 'speech'? Various vehicle that American speech is in the different mouths of any of us, possessed of particular

> powers of colloquial usage, rhythmic pressure, etc., it is only such. To me, all speeches say the same thing [...] I HATE SPEECH. (p. 35)

Whether or not Perloff's foregrounding of Grenier's refusal of a speech based poetics is an accurate description of the diversity of practices that make up the wide field of 'Language Poetry', her account usefully stresses the fact that its pertinence lies in its relation to the late twentieth century reality of mass mediated society. The question that this poetry persistently asks is, as she says, 'Given the particular options (and nonoptions) at the turn of the twenty-first century, what significant role can poetic language play?' (p. 3). Perloff's answer is that the radical artifice of 'Language Poetry' - precisely its refusal of a 'natural' speech based poetics - provides poetic language with a mode of resistance to, and a means of critique of, the mass mediated society of which it is a product. In Perloff's submission, notions of authenticity have been rendered anachronistic by the twentieth-century's ever accelerating revolutions in information technology, the human subject buried beneath a plethora of mass mediated images and the simulated authenticity of 'individual' experience as presented on networked T.V. 'talk shows':

> If American poets today are unlikely to write passionate love poems or odes to skylarks or to the Pacific Ocean, it is not because people don't fall in love or go birdwatching or because the view of the Pacific from, say, Big Sur doesn't continue to be breathtaking, but because the electronic network that governs communication provides us with the sense that others - too many others - are feeling the same way. (pp 202-203)

This is the 'depthless' vision of postmodernity, as described by Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, in which interiority is flattened out and experience reduced to the simulacra of Disneyland or the pastiche of the Bonaventure Hotel. Perloff argues that such 'depthlessness' implies the end of the lyric. 'Language Poetry's', 'appropriation of found objects - snippets of advertising slogans, newspaper headlines, media cliché, textbook writing, or citation from other poets works precisely to deconstruct the possibility of the formation of a coherent lyric voice, a transcendental ego' (p. 12). Wills describes this deconstruction of the lyric self as a 'recognition of the multiple discourses which traverse the boundaries of the self' (p. 40), and Perloff

embraces it as a move 'from a closed poetic to an open rhetoric'.[16] That is to say that the increased penetration of mass mediated technologies renders the 'poetic' of Romanticism and Modernism, based upon the authenticity of private experience, at least anachronistic if not impossible. Therefore, the dominant mode of contemporary poetry shifts from that of lyric privacy to 'open rhetoric'. The self is no longer the site of thetic proclamation but in the wake of 'the death of the subject' becomes the conduit for the information flows of the late capitalist, multinational, 'hyper-reality' of the global economy.

Wills notes that the connection suggested here between the 'open rhetoric' of Perloff's decentred poetics and the rhetorical political demands of identity politics, masks the serious disagreement of the two positions:

> While feminist 'expressive' poetry is seen as rhetorical because of its representational qualities (its rhetorical demand depends to a large extent on the valency of the personal, the sentimental, the domestic), in contrast experimental poetry is celebrated as an 'open rhetoric' precisely by claimimg that there is no private aesthetic sphere, no realm of unmediated personal experience, to act as the ground of representation. (p. 41)

This apparent impasse was the starting point of my engagement with Wills' work, setting in opposition as it does the politics of formal experimentation and identity politics. However, the reason I have been following her work so closely is for the way out she offers from this opposition. Although the two accounts of postmodernism that I have outlined above seem to necessarily oppose one another, Wills importantly underscores their common ground. Both of these positions reconfigure our understanding of the relationship between the public and private spheres, and in so doing they alter completely the ground upon which lyric poetry is based:

> My contention is that we cannot uncover the nature of the relationship between formal experimentation and a feminist demand while we continue in our partial understanding of the status of the contemporary lyric within public discourse. Whatever the complexities of the above debate [between the two forms of postmodernism outlined above], what can be said is that along with the disruption of the private space for individual experience and aesthetic contemplation, the traditional conception of poetic form is opened up, ensuring that there isn't a pristine sphere of the lyric self which is not politicised and constructed.

> Thus, it is not that 'expressive' poetry naively falls back on a stable individuality, and experimental work explores the radical absence of subjectivity. Both are responses to the reconfiguring of the relationship between public and private spheres which makes the 'private' lyric impossible, and in effect opens it out towards rhetoric. (p. 39)

Wills' discussion of Northern Irish poetry and her brief allusion to the work of Adrienne Rich indicate, then, how the use of the first person in a postmodern politics of identity refute the apolitical universalism of the anachronistic romanticism of the dominant tradition in contemporary British poetry. These poetries dramatise the fact that the negotiation of a subject position is a thoroughly political matter, as Huyssen puts it:

> The question of how codes, texts, images, and other cultural artifacts constitute subjectivity is increasingly being raised as an always already historical question. And to raise the question of subjectivity at all no longer carries the stigma of being caught in the trap of bourgeois or petit-bourgeois ideology; the discourse of subjectivity has been cut loose from its moorings in bourgeois individualism. It is certainly no accident that questions of subjectivity and authorship have resurfaced with a vengeance in the postmodern text. After all, it does matter who is speaking or writing. (p. 213)

If it is the case that the assertion of the rights of minority groups in the second half of the twentieth century has shifted the relationship between the public and private spheres thereby transforming the status of the lyric, so it is the case that the technological revolutions of the same period have also altered what it entails for a poet to employ the first person. Wills's argument is that experimental poetry in general, and certainly experimental poetry by women poets, exploits these transformed conditions of the possibility of the lyric in order to explore the linguistic and social determinations of the self:

> experimental women poets seem less concerned with reflecting in their work the absence of interiority in contemporary culture (what Baudrillard calls 'obscenity' - a state in which nothing remains hidden or concealed) than with exploring the ways in which the relationship between the public world of the mass media and the experience of being an individual is mediated. Much of this poetry reveals not the absence of a sphere of privacy but the ways in which that private or intimate realm of experience is constructed 'through' the public, and therefore elements of

> 'expressivity', though radically divorced from notions of authenticity, are present. (pp. 41-42)

Wills offers the work of Lyn Hejinian and Denise Riley as exemplary of this negotiation of the self within the discourses that surround it. Describing Hejinian's *My Life*, Wills comments:

> Introspection in her autobiography My Life reveals an attention to the ways in which the female self negotiates a place within the discourses which construct her (p42)...There is interiority, but it can only be articulated in language, which is by nature impersonal though it can be made personal. The structuring elements in this text then are less the technological invasive mechanisms of the postmodern world of communications than the discourses of personal memory, family life, private reading and so on (p43) [...] In a sense throughout the text she [Hejinian] becomes the context in which language is met and absorbed, and thus undergoes a form of estrangement within discourse. But the flip side of estrangement is identification, and the work draws attention to the ways identifications are formed through a process of negotiation of meanings (indeed otherwise the question of context would disappear, since there would only be discourses). And, in the same way, the reader also negotiates his or her place in relation to the series of contingencies which make up the language of the text. (p. 44)

Similarly, Wills argues that Denise Riley's poetry offers an insight into the negotiations between the intimacies of a selfhood that is apprehended as always already mediated by the mass media discourses that surround it. Her work provides 'a reminder that intimate situations can't be experienced innocently: personal feeling is 'constructed', but it isn't entirely emptied out. The interest and tension lies in the relation between these reified mass-cultural images and the drive to express feelings and emotions through identification with and appropriation of such discourses' (p. 46). In conclusion she asserts that:

> My discussion of Hejinian and Riley's work has suggested that, despite their use of experimental poetic forms, which question the coherence of the poetic 'voice' and the consistency of the speaking 'I', their poetry is nonetheless strongly weighted towards articulating questions of interiority and emotional inwardness. But that interiority is defined less as fixed identity than as a series of processual identifications with elements of both the private (familial) sphere and the public world, in which language comes to us already moulded by the media. Far from recording the radical hollowing out of subjectivity, this poetry suggests that it is

> through the productive appropriation of elements of mass-culture that a meaningful subjectivity can emerge. (p. 50)

Wills therefore sees the account offered by Perloff of the experimental poetics of 'Language Poetry' as only partially useful. It is helpful to the extent that it locates the significance of this body of work, and experimentalism in general, in its relationship with the information glut of the technological revolutions of the twentieth century. However, Perloff 'simplifies the issues because of her assumption that the realm of personal and private experience has been wholly emptied out by the mass media and electronic technology' (p. 41). The difficulty with Perloff's position, as Wills sees it, is that experimental poetry is reduced to being a symptom at the cultural level of the wider transformations of the twentieth century. The poetry simply reflects the depthlessness of the age, and every poem reiterates this same point regardless of its particularity. My own reservations with Perloff's position are not, however, that she simply endorses the 'obscenity' of Baudrillard's depthless 'hyper-reality' or that she concurrs with Jameson's account of the death of the subject within the postmodern condition, but rather that the dismay in her account of the relentless march of Twentieth Century technology leads her to the brink of endorsing those versions of modernism that seek a last refuge of the authentic within the dislocations of poetic form:

> Given the overproduction of [...] instrumental discourses in late-twentieth-century America, with its glut of junk mail, advertising brochures, beepers, bumper stickers, answering-machine messages, and especially its increasing video coercion [...] poetry [...] is coming to see its role as the production of what we might call an alternate language system. (p. 49)

Perloff argues, as we have seen, that lyric privacy has been undermined by 'the electronic network that governs communication [and which] provides us with the sense that others - too many others - are feeling the same way'. (p202) In the face of this leaching away of the poet's privileged claim to sensitivity, Perloff claims that experimentation operates 'so that poetic language cannot be absorbed into the discourse of the media'. The poet, she informs us, turns 'not surprisingly, to a form of artifice that is bound to strike certain readers as hermetic and elitist' (p. 203).

I agree with Wills that an interrogation of the intricacies of the relationship between the public and private spheres in lyric poetry is crucial to the refutation of what she describes as the false binarism between expressive and experimental poetry. However, I want to suggest that the opposition conceals more fundamental continuities between 'conservative' and 'experimental' poetries than even Wills' excellent readings reveal.

The manifestation in contemporary British poetry of an opposition between poetic modes that place the self at the centre of the poem and modes that deconstruct the possibility of a coherent self, is itself a tributary of wider debates about lyric poetry. As Kinereth Meyer has pointed out academic criticism of lyric poetry is polarised. The lyric, he argues, is seen in 'one of two ways: either as any inner-directed, self-referential poem - embodying what John Stuart Mill called 'feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude' - or as one component in the inevitable play of language, detached from both intentional ego and external referent.[17] For Meyer both poles of this binary are problematic, '[b]oth approaches are deficient in that they shut out the world' (p. 129). The voice confessing to itself in Mill's image of the lyric poem is solipsistic. The formalism of the 'inevitable' play of language severs any connection between text and world. Crucially Meyer seeks to privilege neither voice nor textuality, instead he points to the inescapable interdependence of the one with the other. Alluding to the work of Paul de Man and Jonathan Culler, Meyer argues that 'criticism of the lyric is still grappling with the phenomenalization of the poetic voice and its relationship to the "strength of figuration" (de Man)' (p. 131). In fact, Culler has argued that 'the fundamental aspect of lyric writing [...] is to produce an apparently phenomenal world through the figure of the voice'.[18] It is a point that has been expanded upon by de Man, who argues that:

> The principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice. Our claim to understand a lyric text coincides with the actualization of a speaking voice [...] Since this voice is in no circumstance immediately available as an actual, sensory experience, the poetic labor that is to make it manifest can take several forms and adopt a variety of strategies. No matter what approach is taken it is essential that the status of the voice not be reduced to being a mere figure of speech or play

> of the letter, for this would deprive it of the attribute of aesthetic presence that determines the hermeneutics of the lyric.[19]

The self-consciousness with which both Culler and de Man couch their formulations is deliberately arch. The fundamental aspect of lyric writing is to produce an 'apparently phenomenal world through the figure of the voice'. The actualised speaking voice that is not to be reduced to a mere figure of speech, and which determines the hermeneutics of the lyric, is an 'aesthetic presence'. Voice and figuration are not opposed here but related in a complex interdependence which energises the lyric "I". The point, as Meyer puts it, is that:

> the lyric I posits not an opposition between oral presence and trope, but an intricate dialectical interdependence of the two which denies both stability and atemporality. The dialectic between the 'confines of the first person singular' and the 'world beyond the self' makes the lyric both a tropological structure which seeks to deny or suppress a speaking presence, and at the same time a reflection of that 'ghost' of orality which remains in the presence of, and, in fact, despite [the] conventions of writing. (p.131)[20]

The lyric is a dynamic continuum in which the first person functions both as an articulating presence and as written figuration:

> as a constant crossing of boundaries between self and versions of the self, between the myth of a voiced presence and the written conventions which deny that presence, the lyric I inhibits stasis, preventing the lyric from becoming a stunning articulation of the isolated moment and preventing itself from becoming a self-sustained, autotelic entity. For the lyric poet, while the I can never transparently stand for the self talking to the self, neither can it function solely as an artful construction. Occurring at the nexus between person and language, or, more specifically, between person and first-person pronoun, the lyric I reflects a necessary interaction between the ghost of orality and the strength of figuration. Focusing on the self and at the same time widening the lens of receptivity to the 'world beyond the self,' the lyric I embodies a dynamic interdependence between speaking and writing which depends for its vitality upon the active participation of the reader. (p.147)

Meyer's essay goes on to demonstrate the dynamic interdependence of voice and figure across a range of poems drawn from several periods: Robert Herrick's 'Upon the losse of his Mistresses' (1648); William Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' (1850); W.B. Yeats' 'The Mask' (1910); Ezra Pound's 'Sestina: Altaforte' (1908-

1910); and Sylvia Plath's 'Ariel' (1961). The significance of this is that it establishes an important generic truism. The lyric can always be shown to consist of a dynamic interdependence of voice and figure. However, as Meyer suggests, this depends upon the active participation of the reader for its vitality. My suggestion is that within contemporary British poetry, under the influence of the ancient family row, poems have too often been read with regard to one pole of the binary voice/figure at the expense of the other.

A good example of a poet whose work has been read with regard to one pole of the binary to the exclusion of the other is Tom Raworth, as I can illustrate by a discussion of accounts of Raworth's work by T.J.G. Harris and Colin MacCabe.[21] In a review of Raworth's *tottering state: Selected Poems 1963-1987*,[22] Harris condemns Raworth for his apparent abandonment of the Romantic expressivist lyric voice. He argues that 'Raworth works without any significant rules and proceeds in an arbitrary way, jotting down words and phrases at random, presumably because he supposes that the mere making of a "record of an immediate ongoing present" is of value' (p. 60). The quotation comes from the publisher's blurb to *tottering state* which claims that Raworth's 'sense of the poem' is 'as [a] record of an immediate ongoing present'. Harris dismissively and contemptuously responds that such a poetic practice 'would seem to describe perfectly how life must appear to a mollusc crawling cautiously over the face of a large, rugged and slippery rock' (p. 60). Intended as an insult, this remark, however, betrays Harris's abject horror at what he considers Raworth's flouting of the rules that govern the pact between reader and poet, rules which stabilise meaning, and which establish the significance of poetic utterance. 'Raworth's work', Harris suggests:

> seems to be a kind of improvisation, but not improvisation in the sense that Bach improvised fugues, the Serbian *guslar* improvised a lay or the traditional jazz-man improvised his music. Whereas these learnt, created and internalised a variety of rules - what one might call a syntax of a poetical or musical kind (and syntax is an integral part of language that [Raworth and] the [other experimental] writers I am discussing mostly ignore) - so that they might create, not in any mechanical way but freely using the rules for expressive ends, ordered configurations that embodied discoveries whose excitement and significance the listener could

> share (the rules inhering in the forms and therefore being perceptible). (p. 60)

Clearly, Raworth's work disturbs Harris by calling in question the rules that govern Harris' horizon of expectation as to what constitutes significant poetic practice. Self-consciously refusing Romantic valorisations of the poet, Raworth's poetry leaves Harris to gloomily conclude that '[t]he underlying assumption seems to be that reality is, at bottom, a meaningless succession of unrelated *puncta temporis* [...] and that writing in this way somehow approaches the quick of our experience of it' (p. 60).

By contrast to Harris' recoil from Raworth's apparent abandonment of the expressivist lyric voice, Colin MacCabe's review of Raworth's *Writing* celebrates its passing: 'The great pleasure of *Writing*[23] is that it celebrates joyfully the release from the imaginative constraints, and the mendacity, of the coherent voice'. Whereas for Harris, Raworth's flouting of syntactical conventions bore disastrous consequences, for MacCabe it is precisely this feature of the work that is praiseworthy: 'Raworth's minimal line, with rarely more than four words and little punctuation, is crucially important [...] It produces a multiple syntax which refuses certainty and allows for a whole variety of voices to fade in and out of the poem as though one were listening to a multiply tuned radio' (p. 1455). Whereas for Harris such a transgressive syntax, with its concomitant commitment to the contingencies of the 'immediate ongoing present', condemns Raworth to a mollusc-like apperception of the world, for MacCabe such transgression is liberating despite its difficulties:

> The attention to the contingent, the insistence on the impossibility of unifying experience except at the cost of repression, the refusal of the coherent voice do lead, however, to genuine problems of comprehension at many points in the poem. This difficulty is not wilfully produced; it is an inevitable consequence of Raworth's commitment to the specificity of the moment. It does point, however, to a genuine cultural contradiction in which Raworth's writing is caught. We continue to read poetry within a culture which gives central importance to literary tradition, and to recognizable divisions between writers and readers. Raworth's poetry makes an implicit Utopian demand for a culture without such divisions, or such a centre; it is fully anarchist in its equivalent political appeal for 'nonadministered justice'. (p. 1455)

This polarised critical response to the work of Raworth is typical of accounts

of contemporary British poetry that pit the expressive voice against the materiality of the signifier. While MacCabe's review of *Writing* begins judiciously enough, pointing out that 'much of the poem turns on an opposition between the voice, which constantly places the self, and writing, which offers the possibility of a continuous displacement' (p. 1455), it proceeds to read Raworth's poem through the theoretical matrix of the second term of this binary opposition, seizing upon its apparently radical subversion of the conservative lyric voice, rather than attempting to think through the complex interdependence of both voice and writing in Raworth's text.

John Barrell is one critic who has attempted such a balanced reading of Raworth's work.[24] Barrell is wary of such a one sided embrace of the discontinuities of textuality as MacCabe's 'radical' reading of Raworth, and comments of MacCabe's review that, 'it is hard to believe in the possibility of the "release" MacCabe discovers in Raworth's poetry, or even that it would be especially joyful':

> To me, Raworth's poetry seems to be studiedly neutral in its account of the issues [...] representing the coherence of the self and the release from the constraints of coherence as the equally impossible alternatives which define the limits of utterance - which confine our utterances within the limits, on the one hand, of a voice so thoroughly impervious to interruption as always to be producing and instantiating, in all it says, its entire at oneness with itself; and on the other, the equally impossible notion of an infinite plurality of voices, so thoroughly emancipated from coherence that no connection ever appears between any two words they speak. It is as impossible to imagine ourselves emancipated - and I use the plural because I take it that we are all conservatives, by Raworth's account, whatever else we may also be - it is as impossible to imagine ourselves as emancipated from the coherence of the self as it is to take seriously the notion that we are entirely constrained by it. (pp. 391-92)

This account of Raworth's poetics covers a considerable amount of ground, which I will develop at some length. Barrell illustrates his argument that Raworth's text refuses to side with either pole of the binary voice/writing by quoting extensively from the beginning and middle passages of *Writing*. He suggests that '[t]he lines continually give voice to the desire to discover the single voice that utters them, as often as they deny that there is any such identity to be

found' (p. 400). This general impression of the poem's dialectic is supported by Barrell's discussion of the following lines from the middle section of the poem:

prints
voice
prints
are not
identity
comrade
in a pig's
eye
(quoted in Barrell, pp. 397-398)

There is an allusion here to the frontispiece of the poem, as it appears in the 1982 edition published by The Figures Press, which is of a voiceprint taken at the San Francisco Exploratorium of the poet, reading *Writing*, and entitled 'WRITING'. For MacCabe the voiceprint exemplifies the discontinuities of the poem's textual strategies, 'it dissolves the unity of the personal voice into differentiated bands of sound' (p1455), the voiceprint represents the triumph of graphemic representation over authentic speech, as personal identity is reduced to the impersonal tracings of the voice-recorder's print-out. Raworth's poetry, MacCabe suggests, allows that there is a temptation to hold speech and writing together as in the dominant mode of representation, but ultimately speech and writing should be understood to be severed: '"prints/ voice/ prints/ are not/ identity/ comrade/ in a pig's/ eye"; the play between the verbal and substantival forms of *voice* and *prints* both enacts the way in which we equate speech and writing, and yet insists on their difference' (p1455). A voiceprint would be considered a far less substantial piece of evidence than a fingerprint by those profoundly empiricist men and women of the police services caricatured here. Despite the lure offered by a text to represent directly the speech of its protagonists, voiced presence must give way to its mediation by the instabilities of writing.

MacCabe's insistence that the voiceprint dissolves the unity of the personal voice reiterates the polarised opposition between voiced presence and the instabilities of textuality. Barrell's reading is much more alive to the ambiguities in Raworth's text:

> 'voice/ prints/ are not/ identity/ comrade/ in a pig's/ eye'. And what this tells us - according to how you choose to inflect the lines - is that the voiceprint either does or does not repesent the single origin in consciousness of the poem we are reading. You think voiceprints aren't identity? it says - in a pig's eye, of course they are. Or they are not identity, it says, not to the pigs, the police: they do not pass current, like fingerprints, as legal evidence of who you are. In Raworth's reading, of course, the inflection offers no help to adjudicate between these readings. (p. 400)

Barrell is careful to point out that Raworth's reading of his own poem deliberately refuses to inflect its meaning in one way or the other. In order to negate the aura of authenticity that could surround the poet's performance of his own text, Raworth famously reads his work with great rapidity. Barrell has described extremely well how this reading strategy feels to an audience, pointing out its consequences with considerable acuity, and I shall therefore quote him at length:

> [Raworth's] readings are extraordinarily charged, tense occasions which leave the audience as breathless as the poet. He reads at high speed and in a tone which is not exactly uninflected, but which has the effect of being so, because it gives almost the same inflection, and an almost equal emphasis, to every line. That equality of emphasis amounts to a refusal of all affect, a refusal which seems to offer the words of the poem as an empty succession of empty signs. You can hear his reading as insisting on the isolation of each line from the lines before and after; or as insisting on their connection. Not much enjambment is ever permitted, so that, whether or not the syntax is continuous from line to line, the continuities of syntax, across the line endings, are treated no differently from its discontinuities. But all this happens at a frantic speed, which manages to suggest the urgent relation of each line with the next. There is the sense, then, of a lack of all connectedness, and the sense of connections everywhere; for if continuous syntax is treated as if it were discontinuous, then the discontinuous can come to be heard, however uncertainly or provisionally, as continuous; and that sense of possible and uncertain connection is reinforced [...] by phrases which leak into each other, so that continually a phrase starts off apparently belonging within one structure, only to find itself part of another. (pp. 393-394)

This brilliant account of the impact of a Raworth reading is of more than descriptive importance. Contrary to Harris' claim that syntax is an integral part of language that Raworth ignores, Barrell's description foregrounds the way in

which syntax retains a central function both in the work of Raworth and experimental writing more generally.

Syntax has long been a key faultline in discussions of contemporary British poetry. Harris' hostility towards Raworth's dislocated syntax directly echoes Donald Davie's paradigmatic statement of mainstream responses to the dislocations of Modernism, 'that to dislocate syntax in poetry is to threaten the rule of law in the civilized community'.[25] MacCabe's assertion that Raworth's 'multiple syntax' is 'fully anarchist in its equivalent political appeal for "nonadministered justice"' lends justification to such mainstream suspicions, and once more reinstates the opposition between radical and conservative poetic practices. For Barrell, however, a consideration of syntax does not involve deciding between a conservative adherence to, or a radical transgression of, syntactical norms. Syntax, Barrell argues, plays a more fundamental role in our linguistically mediated apprehension of experience than the either/or, conservative/radical, opposition allows:

> Unless we believe that the world is prior to language, that it makes sense all by itself without help from language, and that the task of language is to report on the sense that the world has already made - unless we believe all that, then it seems to be syntax that rescues order from randomness, that divides the continuous play of events and signs into acts and scenes. And if syntax does that, it does something else as well: it provides us with the sense that *we* are a sequence, that the things that pass through our mind are related, that we endure through them, that we have a coherent and continuous identity [...] It is syntax that announces that the mind is the director as well as the spectator of the play of mental events - of memories, thoughts, perceptions, imaginings. (p. 388)

It is in the light of this central function that Barrell ascribes to syntax that his claim that, 'we are all conservatives, by Raworth's account' (p392), should be understood. Such a conservatism, however, is not that of Harris, which would see lyric poetry as revealing the hidden truths of an already meaningful world. Barrell's position takes on board MacCabe's critique of this conservatism of the lyric voice, agreeing that its privileging of speech 'binds us to an imaginary, a preordained position of centrality which we are condemned to defend, as if the identity which is [...] the effect of our articulation was really its origin' (p. 389).

But whereas MacCabe's critique of the lyric voice can only celebrate in Raworth's poetry its apparently joyful exploration of 'the release from the imaginary constraints, and the mendacity, of the coherent voice' (p1455), Barrell's account can find in the connections made by syntax the continuities as well as the discontinuities of writing. In doing so, Barrell is able to acknowledge that coherence, continuity, and order, are more than mendacious illusions constraining us within fixed identities from which we crave emancipation. Rather, Barrell finds in the syntactical register of Raworth's poetry, where there is the sense of a lack of all connectedness, and the sense of connections everywhere, an answer to 'our desire to defeat the random by making whatever connections and shapes we can' from the raw data of experience (p. 393). It is in this sense, then, that Barrell understands us all to be conservatives, for:

> [I]t [does not] quite ring true to speak of Raworth's work as if it represents all desire and all emancipation as in the direction of the discontinuous, all constraint as the constraint of continuity. The continuous and the discrete are each constituted by the other, and inevitably there is a desire in spite of desire, expressed in the coherences of syntax however brief and provisional, to find an escape from our subjection to, as Shelley called it, 'the accident of surrounding impressions', or from the endless succession of mental events, or from the repeated dislocations of language. (p. 392)

The crucial point that Barrell makes here is that the reading of Raworth's poetry offered by MacCabe really does push in the direction of Harris' description of it as a mollusc-like apperception of the world. Some degree of coherence, some modicum of identification, is required if experience is not to be flattened out to 'the accident of surrounding impressions'. But, on the other hand, this does not entail the conservatism of Harris's account of the centrality of the lyric voice, because the insistent textuality of Raworth's work continually demands that the conditions of its existence be examined. As Barrell puts it: 'Raworth's poetry [...] is anything but conservative, not because it disavows the conservatism of the centred subject, but because it repudiates the notion that subjectivity is always already coherent, always already at the centre of things' (p. 392).

Barrell's reading of Raworth foregrounds the way in which the 'family row' between traditionalists and experimentalist is in fact an argument about the relation of poetic form to experience. I believe that the noise from the 'family row' gets in the way of an appreciation of the way in which work from both traditions is actually engaged upon the important project of making sense of the complexities of the post-war period. The polarised readings of the texts of post-war British poetry always towards one pole or other of the binary voice/writing stands in the way of an appreciation of this project, leading readers and critics into the dead-end of the mutual hostility of the 'family row'. I suggest that a way forward can be found if attention is paid to the nuances of the binary voice/writing in examples of work from both traditions. I will use the short poem by Roy Fisher that provides the epigraph to this thesis to illustrate what I mean:

'It is Writing'

Because it could do it well
The poem wants to glorify suffering.
I mistrust it.

I mistrust the poem in its hour of success,
A thing capable of being
Tempted by ethics into the wonderful.[26]

'It is Writing' bridges the two strands of contemporary poetry in the way in which it uses the mainstream convention of the speaking 'I' at its centre to call in question the lyric drive towards romantic modes of self-expression. The mistrust of the poem insists that it is *writing* and must be recognised as such in all its materiality, despite poetry's siren call to transcend the quotidian in a moment of pure lyricism. The poem describes a tension between poetry's textual aspect and its ability to make present a speaking voice.

As Barrell citation of Shelley suggests, since the Romantic period the triumph of the lyric voice has been seen in its ability to transcend the self's subjection to 'the accident of surrounding impressions'.[27] This is the Romantic ideal which enables the poet to find a voice beyond his or her individual concerns, and which is fully endorsed by Seamus Heaney, the contemporary poet perhaps most

obviously influenced by this Romantic line of inheritance. In an important and explicitly Romantic reading of the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Heaney emphasises lyric transcendence by drawing on W.B Yeats's famous dictum that the lyric poem transforms the contingent self from 'the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast' into 'an idea, something intended, complete', and Robert Frost's equally famous assertion that the lyric poem provides 'a momentary stay against confusion', in order to argue that:

> What is implicit [...] is an argument for the deep humanity of the achieved poem, [...] it unites reader and poet and poem in an experience of enlargement, of getting beyond the confines of the first person singular, of widening the lens of receptivity until it reaches and is reached by the world beyond the self [...] what all humankind has known and experienced is potentially available through the ceremony of the poem and thus, once again, the poem's right to its place in the world, its universal validity, is secured.[28]

Helen Vendler, in her recent study of the work of Seamus Heaney, endorses Heaney's own account of his ambition: 'Each successful [lyric] poem', she argues 'presents itself as a unique experiment in language'. 'Its act', she continues, 'is to present, adequately and truthfully [...] the private mind and heart caught in the changing events of a geographical place and a historical epoch'.[29] It is precisely such success that Fisher's 'It is Writing' mistrusts. I take Fisher to mean by 'the wonderful' that view of the poem described by Heaney above and which he elsewhere develops as 'poetry's power to bear the historical brunt, to bear witness to a trust in common sustaining values'.[30] 'It is Writing' acknowledges this temptation. The poem is 'A thing capable of being/Tempted by ethics into the wonderful'. That is to say that 'the wonderful' acknowledges poetry's redemptive moment, its ethical demand that things could be different. Fisher is wary of 'the ceremony of the poem' and its claim to 'universal validity' and insists that the poem must not be tempted into offering a vision of redemption in an unredeemed world. The dream may be pursued but its realisation must always be deferred, 'It is [,after all, only] writing'.

Neil Corcoran in his useful but emphatically mainstream survey of post-war poetry, *English Poetry Since 1940*, offers an interesting account of the poetics Fisher implies by 'It is Writing':

> The poem is not to be a site of transformation or transcendence, a location in which a subdued human passivity registers its diminishments, accepting them by apparently overcoming them in the scene of writing: this 'ethics' is no 'success' at all, and makes the poem only a place of self-recognition or specious consolation.[31]

Unwittingly, I would suggest, Corcoran produces here a devastating critique of the dominant poetic in very similar terms to Crozier's analysis that I discussed in Chapter One of a mode within which 'nostalgia is [...] fully naturalized.[32] As Corcoran suggests, Fisher's poem explicitly rules out the sort of 'self-recognition' and 'consolation' that I argued was a feature of Heaney's poem 'Exposure'. However, Cocoran proceeds to read Fisher's ethics of denial as a sign of transcendence, counter to Fisher's explicit injunction against poetic invocations of 'the wonderful':

> 'Much of Fisher's work, as a result - it almost seems dutifully - refuses this temptation. The refusal is a kind of self-limitation and a kind of chastity: the poems characteristically give the impression of something undeclared, held in check, warily resistant to declaration'. (pp. 172-173)

Corcoran's reading is determined to recover from Fisher's poems 'the ordinary satisfactions of imaginative work', while the refusals of such satisfactions are dismissed as 'etiolated', 'abrasive', and 'rebarbative' (p. 173). It is as if Corcoran cannot quite believe an English poet could seriously engage with American modernist techniques, and consequently he concludes that:

> All of this occasionally threatens to tumble [Fisher's] poems into chasms of irresolvability, incertitude and indeterminacy, their images and statements appearing to maintain only the most tenuous and brittle congruence [...] Nevertheless these exquisite vanishings and dissolvings are also frequently transfused by a strain of the late-Romantic never openly admitted to but none the less powerfully present. This has the effect of casting up, suddenly and unexpectedly, a particular figure, notation or image (usually associated, more or less explicitly, with loss) with striking inevitability. (p. 173)

Modernist dislocations are glossed as mere reticence rather than as a critique of the dominant poetic tradition. In an extraordinary act of repression Fisher's poetic is brought all the way over to line up behind the figure of William Wordsworth so that Corcoran is able to remark of the sequence 'Handsworth

Liberties'[33]:

> In a sequence [...] developed, once more, out of images from a specific urban-industrial location, these lines appear to want to restore to this place something of the intensity of feeling associated with more 'natural' places in the history of English Romanticism; the poem, we might say, places Handsworth, for all the manifest discontinuities, into an edgy continuity with the Derwent and the Duddon in Wordsworth. (p174)

Corcoran's reading of Fisher here is, I suggest, symptomatic of the pressure placed upon critics and readers by the history of the vituperative literary dispute I have been calling, following Sean O'Brien, the 'family row' between traditionalists and experimentalists to approach texts from one pole or the other of the binary voice/writing. Corcoran is if course fully aware of Fisher's liminal status, and that his distance from the mainstream is a function of his experiments with form:

> [The work] resists the authority of organic coherence or closure; its separate elements remain obdurately separate, refusing to strain for the potentially specious or spurious glamour of interrelationship [...] [This] is undoubtedly the major reason for Fisher's reputation as a difficult 'writer' and (even after his publication by a very 'mainstream' publisher, Oxford University Press), a largely unassimilated one. He is a poet in whom the experiential facts of observation and perception are often disconcertingly unsettled by their becoming facets of a perceiving consciousness itself. Social commentary, we might say, is always placed at risk by poetic meta-commentary; landscape, by displacement into mindscape; fact, by reverie'. (p. 172)

These comments accurately describe the link between Fisher's characteristic epistemological uncertainties and the explanation of his problematic status within the critical assessment of contemporary British poetry. However, rather than developing this line of enquiry into the philosophical and political entailments of Fisher's working with modernist preoccupations, Corcoran, as I have argued, collapses this insight into an equation with English Romanticism.

In the next chapter I will argue that Fisher's key position as a liminal figure in the history of post-war British poetry makes his work an important site for beginning to think beyond the dead-end of the 'family row'. It does so, I will argue, because the controversies surrounding his place in the literary history of

post-war poetry keep both poles of the binary voice/writing in play rather than collapsing them, on the one hand, into a conservative valorisation of Romantic poetics, as is the case in Corcoran's reading discussed above, or on the other hand, of collapsing them into a reading which would stress the modernist emphasis upon the materiality of language which is none the less abundantly evident in Fisher's work.

Endnotes

[1] Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 48.
[2] Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice', in *Critical Quarterly*, 36.3 (1994), 34-52, (pp. 34-35).
[3] Wills, *Improprieties*, p. 48.
[4] Wills, *Improprieties*, p. 198.
[5] Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry', p. 38.
[6] Wendy Mulford, '"Curved, Odd…Irregular". A Vision of Contemporary Poetry by Women', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 1.3 1990, 261-274, (pp.261-262).
[7] Jerome J. McGann, 'Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes', in *Critical Inquiry*, 13 Spring, (1987), 624-647.
[8] Mulford, pp.261-262.
[9] Peter Middleton, 'Who Am I to Speak? The Politics of Subjectivity in Recent British Poetry', in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 107-133, (p. 120).
[10] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed., by Peter Brooker, (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 167-168.
[11] Edward Said, 'Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors', in *Critical Inquiry* 15 Winter, (1989), p. 223.
[12] Andreas Huyssen, *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 53.
[13] Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
[14] William Wordsworth, 'Prefaces, etc', in *Wordsworth Poetical Works*, ed., by Thomas Hutchinson; Revised edition, (Oxford: OUP, 1984).
[15] Charles Olson, in Perloff, p. 34.
[16] Perloff, p. 20.
[17] Kinereth Meyer, 'Speaking and Writing the Lyric "I"', in *Genre*, 22, Summer, 1989, 129-149, (p. 129). John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Poetry*, ed. by E. Parvin Sharples, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), p. 12.
[18] Jonathan Culler, 'Changes in the Study of the Lyric', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* ed. by Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press,1985) pp. 38-53 (p. 50).
[19] Paul de Man, 'Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory: Riffaterre and Jauss', in Hosek and Parker, pp.55-72 (p. 55).
[20] The quotation in this passage is from Seamus Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', in Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 148-170 (p. 149).
[21] T.J.G. Harris,. *P.N. Review* 70, Vol 16, No 2, p. 60. Colin MacCabe, 'Dissolving the voice', *TLS*, 30 Dec, 1983, p. 1455.

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[22] Tom Raworth, *tottering state: Selected Poems 1963-1987*, (London: Paladin, 1988).
[23] Tom Raworth, *Writing*, (Berkeley: The Figures Press, 1982).
[24] John Barrell, 'Subject and Sentence: The Poetry of Tom Raworth' in *Critical Inquiry*, 17, Winter, 1991, pp. 386-409.
[25] Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction and Articulate Energy*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 86.
[26] Roy Fisher, The Dow Low Drop: New and Selected Poems, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996), p. 108.
[27] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled "The Four Ages of Poetry"', quoted in Barrell, p. 392.
[28] Seamus Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', in Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, (London: Faber, 1988) p. 149. Heaney quotes Yeats p. 150 and Frost pp. 159-160.
[29] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), pp. 7-12.
[30] Seamus Heaney, 'Current Unstated Assumptions about Poetry', in *Critical Inquiry*, 7 Summer, (1981), 645-651 (pp. 646-647).
[31] Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, (London: Longman, 1993), p. 172.
[32] Andrew Crozier p.218
[33] 'Handsworth Liberties' in Roy Fisher, *Poems 1955-1987*. (Oxford: OUP, 1988), pp. 117-124.

Chapter Five: Roy Fisher

Roy Fisher is a key figure for this study of what I am describing as the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry because his work and its critical reception traverse the faultline in contemporary British poetry between the tradition of formally conservative poetic practices and the poetics of formal experimentation. As Sean O'Brien points out in his introduction to the selection of Fisher's work in *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, 'Fisher provides a bridge between the mainstream and the *avant-garde*'.[1] Fisher has acknowledged his liminal status 'as a between-worlds counter in reviewers' debates' about the 'mainstream' and the 'underground'.[2]

An indication of the way in which Fisher's work straddles the faultline in contemporary British poetry between experimentalism and conservatism is given by the blurb writer to Fisher's *Poems 1955-1987*.[3] The blurb writer does his or her best to sell Fisher to a public presumed to be in need of reassurance by arguing that his work offers the excitement and danger of international modernist or postmodernist experimentation, tempered by a good dose of English scepticism:

> Roy Fisher maintains a unique and curious position in British poetry. Although his subjects are recognizably English (notably in his passionate evocation of the Midlands where he grew up) his style and aesthetics are experimental and internationalist, and he is one of the few British poets to have assimilated the advances made by the Europeans and Americans.

Apart from providing evidence of Fisher's liminal status in discussions of contemporary British poetry, this does offer a significant insight into one of the key features of the reception of Fisher's work. For while Fisher's experimental and internationalist aesthetics retain a residual uneasiness for the blurb writer, it is precisely a matter of content, his use of recognisable English subjects, that bind Fisher into the mainstream of post-war British poetry. It is precisely this strategy that Donald Davie mobilises in his reading of Fisher in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*.

Donald Davie in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, his influential account of the state of English poetry at the beginning of the 1970s, argues that, 'There are in literary England two distinct circles or systems of literary activity and literary reputation, and there is sometimes a rancorous rivalry between them'. This rivalry, he suggests, is founded upon the assumption that, 'No-one can like equally Roy Fisher, who writes in free verse and open forms, and Larkin, who characteristically uses closed forms and writes in meter'.[4] Davie's concern is to assimilate Fisher's experiments in form to an English tradition exemplified by the formal conservatism of the poetry of Philip Larkin, and presided over by the spirit of Thomas Hardy. Davie's polemic is to argue that this opposition is illusory and that, seen in the light of the example of Hardy, 'Fisher and Larkin are very much alike' (p. 154). In making this argument Davie is able to applaud what he regards as Fisher's virtues, his 'Hardyesque tone' (p. 154) which enables him to 'restrict [...] himself as self-denyingly as Larkin to the urbanized and industrialized landscapes of modern England' (p. 165), while tendentiously, but I will suggest, significantly, dismissing Fisher's experiments in form as 'hardly worth the candle' (p. 167).

Davie illustrates Larkin's treatment of urban and industrial landscapes by quoting from 'The Whitsun Weddings', highlighting its depiction of a polluted environment, 'Canals with floatings of industrial froth'. He is concerned to point out what he considers to be Larkin's exemplary objectivity:

> Those slow canals have wound through many a poem about England since T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but never under such a level light as this. For in the poem as a whole the tone of the describing voice is scrupulously neutral [...] And precisely because poem after poem since *The Waste Land* has measured our present (usually seen as depleted) against our past (usually seen as rich), Larkin's refusal to do this is thoroughly refreshing - at last, we recognize with relief, we can take all that for granted, take it as read. (pp. 64-65)

Davie is drawn to similar descriptions of urban landscapes in Fisher's work He quotes in its entirety the second prose section from *City*[5] - a section which describes inner-city decay. 'This', Davie comments, 'is description at its most impressive, able to move with ease into analysis on the one hand and into mournful poetry on the other [...] One responds to it in the first place as one

responds to Larkin's 'Whitsun Weddings': this is how it is!' (p. 158). What is striking about Davie's reading of Larkin and Fisher is the emphasis he places upon the 'relief' that their work provides in the recognition that 'this is how it is!' The value for Davie of Larkin and Fisher's work is the salve it brings to the wound of the severed relationship between poet and reader brought about by the excesses of Romantic subjectivity, and only too recently evident in the writings of the New Apocalyptics. As the insistence of the repetition of the collective pronouns 'we' and 'our' in the passage quoted above demonstrates, poetry achieves its highest value for Davie when it acts out consensus: the 'this is how it is!' of Davie's reading of Larkin and Fisher is consensus with a vengeance.

However, I will argue that the hesitation that I have described as characteristic of Fisher's work between the siren call of lyric and the disjunctures of textuality entails that a reading such as Davie's can not finally pin down its quarry. Fisher's text will not succumb to the Hardyesque compromise with the real, nor will it give way to the temptations of romantic transcendence. Furthermore, it will not as a consequence lapse into any of the available versions of the 'linguistic turn', whether of the modernist or postmodernist kind. I will attempt to illustrate what I mean by first discussing Fisher's poem 'The Memorial Fountain'. Finally I will argue through a reading of 'For Realism' that Fisher's deployment of formal disruption enables a politics too quickly foreclosed by romantic or modernist readings.

'The Memorial Fountain' functions by means of a series of regressions, through sections marked off by discrete breaks in the flow of the text, from a focus upon the external reality of the fountain referred to in the title to a consideration of the figure of the poet composing the scene. However, its significance is only apparent when it is read alongside Davie's 'The Fountain':

THE FOUNTAIN

Feathers up fast, steeples, and then in clods
Thuds into its first basin; thence as surf
Smokes up and hangs; irregularly slops
Into its second, tattered like a shawl;
There, chill as rain, stipples a danker green,
Where urgent tritons lob their heavy jets.

For Berkeley this was human thought, that mounts
From bland assumptions to inquiring skies,
There glints with wit, fumes into fancies, plays
With its negations, and at last descends,
As by a law of nature, to its bowl
Of thus enlightened but still common sense.

We who have no such confidence must gaze
With all the more affection on these forms,
These spires, these plumes, these calm reflections, these
Similitudes of surf and turf and shawl,
Graceful returns upon acceptances.
We ask of fountains only that they play,

Though that was not what Berkeley meant at all. [6]

This poem was chosen by Robert Conquest to open the selection of poems by Davie in *New Lines*. As such it has a prominent place as a key statement of Movement aesthetics. The poem takes issue with the eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley who, in his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), uses the image of water in a fountain, ascending towards the sky and then cascading back to its reservoir, as an image of philosophic inquiry:

> You see, Hylas, the water of yonder fountain, how it is forced upwards, in a round column, to a certain height; at which it breaks and falls back into the basin from whence it rose: its ascent, as well as descent, proceeding from the same uniform law or principle of *gravitation*. Just so, the same principles which at first view lead to scepticism, pursued to a certain point, bring me back to common sense.[7]

Davie's dispute with Berkeley hinges on the contested meaning of 'play'. For Davie 'play' denotes staightforwardly the motion of water in a fountain. For Berkeley 'play' connotes not only the action of the water, but is also a figure of human thought. Davie would be content if thought were like a fountain and rose to 'inquiring skies' only to fall back 'to its bowl/ Of thus enlightened but still common sense', but the fact that thought can be likened to the actions of a fountain in the first place implies, for Davie, something dangerous about thought itself. As Barry Alpert puts it: 'The metaphor no longer convinces him. In the second stanza therefore, Davie distances himself from language which allows a rhetorical turn'.[8] Davie's fear is that common sense representations of reality will be replaced by highly subjective representations as the poet revels in the

figural potential of language. Poetry will be returned to the 'anarchy' of the idiosyncratic metaphoric and symbolic systems that the Movement accused the poets of the Forties of indulging in.

However, the problem for Davie, and the uneasiness of the poem, is that a fountain can not be said to 'play' in the purely denotative fashion that he intends, and 'to ask of fountains only that they play' is to immediately admit the metaphoricity that he seeks to exclude. The opening line of Fisher's 'The Memorial Fountain' alludes to this aporia in Davie's poem:

The fountain plays
through summer dusk in gaunt shadows,
black constructions
against a late clear sky,
water in the basin
where the column falls
shaking,
rapid and wild,
in cross waves, in back-waves,
the light glinting and blue,
as in a wind
though there is none,
Harsh
skyline!
Far-off scaffolding
bitten against the air. (p. 80)

It also problematises the status of the description of the fountain. Does Fisher simply present the fountain in the manner that Davie would endorse? Is such a goal possible? Or does he begin by employing playful metaphors in order to draw attention to the role of figural language in any representation of objects of experience?

One possible answer to these questions begins to form in the next section which details the 'Sombre mood' of the poet:

Sombre mood
In the presence of things;
no matter what things;
respectful sepia. (p. 80)

These lines seem to present a generalised statement about poetics, and

comment directly upon the writing that immediately preceeds them, suggesting that the effect that the writing has striven for is the curtailed presentation of things that Davie urges. The poet's mood should always be sombre, his tone always respectful, no matter what his subject. This reading is supported by the reference to 'respectful sepia' which, suggestive of old photographs, provides an echo of Larkin's 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', where photography is elevated in status above that of the visual arts for its supposed virtue of presenting things as they are without the interference of the artist's subjectivity. This would seem to suggest that the opening of the poem has been written with these kinds of aesthetic precept to mind. However, such a reading of the poem is to be radically undermined by the next section which describes the presence of other observers of the scene contemplated by the poet:

> This scene:
> people on the public seats
> embedded in it, darkening
> intelligences of what's visible;
> private, given over, all of them —
>
> Many scenes.
>
> Still Sombre. (p. 80)

The poem now begins to reflect upon its own production out of a public space, a shared experience of the fountain at dusk on a summer's evening. Until this point it has been possible to read the poem as exemplary of Movement aesthetics with only its problematic form and the allusion to the Davie poem suggesting to the contrary. Now the poem directly disconcerts a reading that has proceeded from the collective pronoun typical of Movement poetry. Fisher deconstructs the comfortable assumptions of the collective pronoun by insisting that even in a public space, ironically the supposed site of shared civic collectivity, people are caught within their own private subjectivities. This entails serious problems for the controlling subjectivity of the poem, the 'I' that does the seeing of 'This scene' This is because the other observers of the scene are not simply passive figures in a tableau, but are active participants in the production of it. This means that the 'I' at the centre of the poem can not claim to see the definitive scene because, as the next section has it, there are "Many scenes". To borrow M. H. Abrams' terms, what has happened in the space of five lines is that the

dominant aesthetic of Movement poetry, the mirror, has been replaced by the aesthetic model of the lamp, which emphasises the creative subjectivity of the artist's imagination. The grounds of the collective pronoun, the assumption that art reflects reality in a way that we can all recognise and share, has been subverted by this realisation. But Fisher's move is more disturbing than a switch from a realist aesthetic to a Romantic aesthetic since, as I have argued, the sovereignty of the poet has also been undermined. Fisher's version of the lamp aesthetic is of a peculiar dimming of visibility rather than vivid illumination. He recognises that the presence of other observers renders his scene partial. The kaleidoscope of many scenes, therefore, is figured as a darkening of what's visible in order to suggest the diminution of the poetic self. The poem debunks the earlier 'Sombre mood' of the section that seemed to endorse Movement aesthetics. The poet confides that he is 'Still sombre', but now that solemnity comes not from an attitude towards aesthetics but from the chastening experience of accepting that the poetic self is as contingent as the subjectivities of the other observers that the poet rubs shoulders with in the city's public spaces.

The poem has now dwelt on subjectivity for several lines to the exclusion of a consideration of the fountain which is its ostensible occasion. The next section marks a return to the fountain, but through an off-hand locution that suggests the poem's preoccupation is with the processes of perception rather than with the objects of perception themselves:

> As for the fountain:
> nothing in the describing
> beyond what shows
> for anyone;
> above all
> no 'atmosphere'.
> It's like this often —
> I don't exaggerate. (p. 80)

The stress on the absence of 'atmosphere' in the description of the fountain reiterates just how much the poem is engaged in a debate about poetics. It echoes Davie's claim that in Larkin's poetry 'the tone of the describing voice is scrupulously neutral'. However, the quotation marks used to pick out 'atmosphere' draw attention to the distance between Davie and Fisher's positions. For Davie the voice of the poem should be neutral in order to achieve

objective description. For Fisher such objectivity is unobtainable. The preceding sections of the poem have shown how any particular representation of the fountain must take its place alongside those of other observers of the scene. Which entails that the description of the fountain at the beginning of the poem can no longer be seen as neutral, as the careful and controlled rendering of the object. Instead, it must now be interpreted as participating in the figural play that Davie seeks to deny. The description, for instance, of the skyline as 'harsh' can not now be said to be neutral. Rather, it must now be read as the subjective creation of the poet's imagination. The poem ends by considering the figure of the poet caught in the act of composition:

> And the scene?
> a thirty-five-year-old man,
> poet,
>   by temper, realist,
> watching a fountain
> and the figures round it
> in garish twilight,
>   working
> to distinguish an event
> from an opinion;
>   this man,
> intent and comfortable —
>
> Romantic notion. (pp. 80-81)

It is, the poem concludes, a 'Romantic notion' to suppose that the poet could attain an objective representation of the scene before him.

My reading of 'For Realism' emphasises the way in which Fisher's poem problematises realism as a mode of representation. The poem's problematised opening invocation of realism, separated from the rest of the text by a colon, induces readerly expectations about what is to follow. The reader expects the poem to refer to a recognisable reality but is already alerted to the artifice that this will involve. The remainder of the first verse paragraph in fact conforms to this expectation. The next three lines deftly fulfil the expectation of the presentation of a recognisable reality: 'the sight of Lucas's/ lamp factory on a summer night;/ a shift coming off about nine' (p. 78).. We are given a precise location which is made palpable by the colloquial locution 'coming off' and the

imprecision of the specification of time. The implied reader is bound into the reality of the scene by his or her assumed knowledge of the working pattern of the shift system, a realism that is compounded by the familiarity of the scene, repeated night after night, making the need for an exact temporal placement redundant. But these lines also begin to confirm the poem's suspicion of such referentiality. Since we have already been alerted to look for indications of artifice the explicitly referential use of deixis draws attention to itself. The apparent determinacy of the definite article of 'the sight of Lucas's/ lamp factory' (p. 78) is made vulnerable as its attempt to guarantee the objectivity of the scene depicted is called in question by the connotations of 'sight', which suggests the problematics of the relationship between perception, subjectivity, and written representation. Perhaps, this hints, the recognisable familiarity of the scene is not as straightforward as it first seems but is rather the product of considerable artfulness. This suggestion is explored further in the remaining lines of the verse paragraph:

> pale light, dispersing,
> runnels of people chased,
> by pavements drying off quickly after them,
> away among the wrinkled brown houses
> where there are cracks for them to go; (p. 78)

Again, the dominant motif is of the recognisable and the familiar, the workers and their houses, but here they are subject to a metaphorical transformation so that their contingent existence takes on a significance greater than they would ordinarily entail. Initially 'pale light' seems to have a deictic role, reinforcing 'about nine' by signalling a summer sunset, however its wider function is as part of the elaborate metaphorical account of the workers' journey home. It is an organic metaphor that evokes the actions of sun and water, connoting the connectedness of community and natural processes. The 'pale light' becomes the agent of the dispersal of the people, figured as the evaporating residue of a rain shower, to their respective anthropomorphised dwellings, whose 'cracks' link the characteristic design of Victorian back-to-back housing, accessed via interlocking alleyways, with the channels created by the percolation of water through porous materials. These people and their homes, it is suggested, are bound together by processes as primordial as the actions of the sun on water, and water on the earth. While the writing of this equivalence of the social and the

natural is seductive, the metaphors which generate it draw attention to the subjective point of view from which it is represented, it is an almost painterly impressionistic evocation of the scene rendered by a mind acutely aware of the figurative possibilities of the quotidian.

Fisher, then, uses metaphor to self-consciously cut across verisimilitude. The poem is neither reducible to a simplistic empiricist presentation of the thing itself, nor to a naive Romantic linguistic idealism. However, of the two images that M.H. Abrams employs to denote these two poles of artistic representation, the mirror and the lamp, it is the latter that is dominant in the poem. The significance of this is intimated by the digression that interrupts the movement of the poem from the direct observations of the first section to the statements of the second:

> pale light for staring up four floors high
> through the blind window walls
> of a hall of engines, shady humps left alone,
> no lights on in there
> except the sky – (p. 79)

These lines suggest an opposition between the 'light for staring up' and the 'blind window walls' of the derelict building, a relic of an industrial past. This opposition carries the weight of the connotations of the binary light/dark, but with an emphasis upon light as the agent of the imagination's transforming lamp. The mirror of verisimilitude, figured as a 'blind window', withers by comparison and is made the butt of the colloquial expression for stupidity, 'no lights on in there'. This passage indicates that although the post-industrial landscape of Birmingham is a brutal fact, poetry can rise above a crass restatement of that facticity and gesture towards possible transformations. However, it is important to insist again that this ray of hope proceeds always already in the knowledge of its negotiation with the constraining forces that surround it. The lamp of the imagination in Fisher's poem shines always through the shade of its commodification and diminution by the industrial processes of 'Lucas's/ lamp factory', or as *City* has it 'The society of singing birds and the society of mechanical hammers inhabit the world together, slightly ruffled and confined by each other's presence'.[9] As the second section of the poem struggles to assert the imagination's sovereignty, it does so in the face of the acceptance that 'Down

Wheeler Street, the lamps' have 'already gone' (p. 79).

This parenthetic movement of the poem, then, can be read as a refutation of the Hardyesque attitude that Donald Davie finds in Fisher as well as in Philip Larkin. The derelict husk of the factory operates as a synecdoche for those many ruins that Davie describes as littering twentieth-century English poetry, but instead of complacently exclaiming 'That is how it is!' as Davie would have it, the poem goes on to consider what can be redeemed from the urban detritus of post-war industrial decay. The poem now switches mode from observation to qualified statement, commenting that 'sometimes, at the corner of Farm and Wheeler Streets,/ standing in that stained, half-deserted place':

> there presses in
> - and not as conscience -
> what concentrates down in the warm hollow:
> plenty of life there still,
> the foodshops open late, and people
> going about constantly, but not far;
>
> there's a man in a blue suit
> facing into a corner,
> straddling to keep his shoes dry;
> women step, talking, over the stream,
> and when the men going by call out, he answers.
>
> Above, dignity. A new precinct
> comes over the scraped hill,
> flats on the ridge get the last light.
>
> Down Wheeler Street, the lamps
> already gone, the windows have
> lake stretches of silver
> gashed out of tea green shadows,
> the after-images of brickwork.
>
> A conscience
> builds, late, on the ridge. A realism
> tries to record, before they're gone,
> what silver filth these drains have run. (p. 79)

In contrast to Gertrude Stein, who famously found of her birthplace, Oakland California, that 'there is no there there', for Fisher in his native Birmingham 'there presses in/.../ what concentrates down in the warm hollow'. 'There' seems to operate here in a double sense. On the one hand it serves its straight forward

grammatical function of establishing a state of affairs. On the other hand it seems to carry this purely conventional grammatical notion of existence over into an almost Heideggarian awareness of Dasein. This peculiar running together of the existential and grammatical functions of 'there' lend an objectivity and groundedness to the qualities that seem to symbiotically impose themselves ('press in') upon the speaking subject's consciousness. The perceiving consciousness of the poem and its objects of perception merge together as Fisher's working-class upbringing and his rootedness in Birmingham's urban environment collapse into the description given of the working class inhabitants of Farm and Wheeler Streets. Like them, 'people/ going about constantly, but not far', Fisher has been shaped by his attachment to a particular locality: 'I couldn't get out of my blood the fact [...] that until I was 13 years old I didn't sleep a night outside the city of Birmingham [...] And I lived in the house I was born in until I was 23 [...] there's a circumstantial adherence to one place with the consequent inevitability of having your mind made up enormously of impressions like that'.[10] However, as always with Fisher, that perceiving consciousness is no tabula rasa but active in constructing the perceptual field before it. Objectively that field is a 'stained, half-deserted place', and yet the imagination bathes it with light so that its stains are suffused with the connotation of stained-glass windows rather than the darkness of the blind windows of the decrepit building beside which the poet surveys the scene. It is this active imagination that enters the 'warm hollow' and contradicts the earlier report of desolation by finding that there is 'plenty of life there still'. And it is this activity which is able to render the sight of a man urinating in public as a metaphor of communal intimacy, and which is able to transform his urine into a 'stream', an organic image of purity chiming with the way in which 'runnels', with its Old English derivation, was used in the first section of the poem to connate continuities between the pre-industrial past and the post-industrial present.

Imagination and place coincide so that in one sense it is the pressure of the force of the locality that seems to impose itself upon the mind's eye, and yet the reader should always be alert to the interpretative function of the act of perception; Fisher's identification with his fellow citizens of Birmingham leads

him to see signs of community which to an outside observer would only be the signs of squalor. Consequently the binary that structures this section of the poem turns on the opposition between the insider's view of 'what concentrates down in the warm hollow' and the perceptions' of outsiders, for which Fisher uses the term 'conscience'. Clearly this 'conscience' is to be contrasted with the perceiving consciousness that is able to identify with the humanity of the people who live in Farm and Wheeler Streets. Unlike that empathetic consciousness, 'conscience' comes to proscribe and not to see. Specifically it comes to the working class community through the perceptual framework provided by the language of 1960s architects and town planners, in which Victorian back-to-backs are slums to be cleared and new technology, in the shape of the construction of modular pre-fabricated tower-blocks, offers utopian solutions to real housing problems, 'houses in the sky'. Already the working class community of Farm and Wheeler street is being encroached upon by the 'new precinct' that is being built on the hill above it. The poem concludes 'A realism/ tries to record, before they're gone,/ what silver filth these drains have run', dramatising through its highly poetic use of an oxymoronic image the impossibility of a (naively empiricist) realistic poetry. But this conclusion also leaves the reader with the problem of deciding what the relationship is between the poem he or she has just read and the claim that it has been through a mode of realism that the poem has attempted to memorialise the locality of Farmer and Wheeler Streets before it disappears beneath the developer's bulldozers.

In 'The Memorial Fountain', a poem as I have argued that explicitly addresses the problematics entailed by realism as a mode of representation, the poet is described as 'by temper, realist' and as 'working to distinguish an event/ from an opinion'. The implication is that a work that achieved the objective referentiality of realism would also succeed in distinguishing an event from an opinion. 'For Realism', however, demonstrates that there is nothing objective about the referential mode of representation, laying bare its rhetorical devices and assumptions. In doing so the poem insists that representation is inextricably bound up with interpretation and therefore that it is impossible to distinguish an event from an opinion. Realism as an aesthetic category is denied any epistemological priority, and this particular poem's depiction of events becomes

only one possible interpretation of the world among many. More than this, the poem suggests that the relation of realism to other interpretative strategies, to the specialised knowledges of architecture and town planning for instance, is one of political impotence. Although the poem in its concluding gesture seems to align itself with a passive realism that endeavours simply to 'record' a community before it is broken up by the forces of economic and social change, it has scrupulously throughout indicated the ways in which the view that it depicts of a community in decline has been suffused by an imaginative identification with that community. The poem is thus an elegy for the demise of a community and also for the comparative weakness of a poetic view of the world in comparison with those of commercial and political interests. The term 'Realism' now carries the connotations of both 'aesthetic mode' and 'attitude' towards the world. Fisher's work is conscious of that realism that accepts that realistically poems are not going to halt the developers in their tracks. But on the other hand an understanding of realism as that mode of representation that simply 'records' external reality as it is, is seen to be deficient in comparison with the poetic imagination which shapes what is there to be seen. The poem's realism (in its worldly wise sense) accepts that it can only memorialise this community, but this does not imply that all poetic acts of interpretation are politically useless. Rather, the poem suggests, it is realism (as a mode of representation) through its referential function - the 'this is how it is!' of Davie's appreciation of Larkin and Fisher - that is susceptible to a stoicism in the face of change, rather than encouraging an engagement with the social and political relations that govern the forms that change will take. Fisher's poem, by contrast, looks towards the fissures in the political world through which the imagination can flourish and offer the possibility that the world might be different than it is. As Fisher has remarked: 'The human mind makes the world [...] If we do not know how our minds work, and how our appetites work [...] we're very poorly equipped to interpret the forms by which we live, i.e. the political dimension of the world. All I ask for is to have the imagination regarded as politicised because the imagination will make the world'.[11] It is precisely Fisher's deployment of techniques inherited from modernism that politicises the imagination in his work. In particular it is his characteristic epistemological uncertainty about the relationship between perception, subjectivity, and written representation that

manifests itself in formal disruption that frees his work up to the transformational possibilities of the imagination, and which shakes off the chains of dominant consensual ways of seeing the world that I have argued are enshrined in Davie's Hardyesque compromise with the real.

The way in which he does this can begun to be seen in his reading of 'For Realism':

> The 'conscience' [in the poem] is the 'social conscience' of those planners, architects and social workers responsible for such 'development', and it is silently condemned by the way the poet's own 'realism' is opposed to it. This 'conscience' has all the hallmarks of certitude, single vision, authority; this 'realism' writes itself in the quite different metaphoric and oxymoronic energies of the phrase 'silver filth', which acknowledges that the conscience has its reasons (the terraces were after all, 'filth'), but not its rationale (it sees filth as only filth, and as no other thing). Only the poem may penetrate beyond the 'conscience' to find a language for the lost community and culture...It strikes a blow 'for realism' against the culpable blindness of all who would presume authority. (pp171-172)

What is startling about this account of the poem is that although it picks up on the 'metaphoric and oxymoronic energies' of 'silver filth' it does so while failing to consider the implications of this poetic excess upon the poem's commitment to realism. It seems to discount Corcoran's observation that in Fisher's poetry '[s]ocial commentary [...] is always placed at risk by poetic meta-commentary', which would entail that the poem cannot simply be seen as striking a blow for realism. Rather, as I have argued above, it must be read as dialectically opposing the transformative powers of the imagination to the social and economic forces of change, in a struggle which although weighted in favour of the dominant reality principle recognises the power of the imagination 'to make the world'. Realism, in its political sense is acknowledged, but as a mode of representation it is chastised for its willed impotence, it can only 'record' change it cannot engage with it. Corcoran's suggestion that the poem 'penetrates beyond' the discourse of the social-workers, architects, and town-planners of 1960s redevelopment 'to find a language for the lost community and culture', on the other hand, collapses the poem into the linguistic idealism it so scrupulously struggles to avoid through the deferments entailed by its epistemological uncertainties.

It is at this point, in a move reminiscent of Davie's assertion in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* that Fisher's modernist procedures are 'hardly worth the candle'(p. 167), that Corcoran looses patience with Fisher's modernist techniques and converts deliberate hesitations into incipient Romantic transcendence. As I discussed in Chapter Four, Corcoran's reading is determined to recover from Fisher's poems 'the ordinary satisfactions of imaginative work', while the refusals of such satisfactions are dismissed as 'etiolated', 'abrasive', and 'rebarbative' (p. 173). Modernist dislocations are glossed as mere reticence rather than as a questioning of the dominant poetic tradition But despite Corcoran's best efforts to bring Fisher's work into line with Wordsworth, Fisher just is not Wordsworth. His formal dislocations simply refuse to line up neatly alongside Wordsworth and the tradition of English Romanticism. And yet, there are in Fisher traces of those sentiments that Corcoran wants to draw out into hard conclusions. Fisher does not quite abandon Romantic yearnings.

In *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* it is Davie's polemic that the example of Thomas Hardy marks a radical, but conservative, break in our understanding of the vocation of the poet. Davie contrasts the work of Hardy with that of Pound, Pasternak, Yeats, Hopkins, and Eliot, poet's who 'are radical in a sense that Hardy isn't':

> All these other poets claim, by implication or else explicitly, to give us entry through their poems into a world that is truer and more real than the world we know from statistics or scientific induction or common sense. Their criticism of life is radical in that they refuse to accept life on the terms in which it offers itself, and has to be coped with, through most of the hours of every day. In their poems, that quotidian reality is transformed, displaced, supplanted; the alternative reality which their poems create is offered to us as a superior reality, by which the reality of every day is to be judged and governed. But...Hardy [does not] make that claim [...] And so his poems, instead of transforming and displacing quantifiable reality or the reality of common sense, are on the contrary just so many glosses on that reality, which is conceived of as unchallengeably "given" and final. This is what makes it possible to say [...] that he sold the vocation short, tacitly surrendering the proudest claims traditionally made for the act of the poetic imagination. (pp. 61-62)

But this selling short is, for Davie, no bad thing. As we saw in Davie's reading of Larkin and Fisher, it is precisely in the acceptance of the quotidian as the unchallengeably given that the value of poetry is located. But Davie's point is not simply that the poetry of Larkin and Fisher, considered as poets whose texts are "just so many glosses on that [quotidian] reality", represents a reduction in poetic expectation but that contemporary poets who seem to be making similar claims to those signified by the name of Pound are also prevailed upon by the postwar situation to back away from an endorsement of the transformative powers of poetry. Thus Davie cites the case of Charles Tomlinson, whose 'styles always transform and displace the realities known to science, to statistics, to the bleared eye of every day; he refuses the Hardyesque surrender, by which those realities are the unquestionable texts which poetry can only gloss'. (p78) But it turns out that Tomlinson's investigations of the quotidian only lead him to discover the necessity for conformity rather than the possibilities for change. Discussing Tomlinson's 'Prometheus', a poem which sets the promethean enthusiasms of the eponymous piece by the revolutionary composer Scriabin against the experience of listening to it broadcast on the radio, where the transformative powers of art must compete with the jingles from an ice-cream van in the suburban street, Davie comments:

> If [Tomlinson] characteristically transforms and displaces quotidian reality, it is not in order to supplant that reality, but on the contrary only to do it justice by defining and following through with patience the articulations of it—articulations which our bleared eyes miss, resonances which our dulled ears slide over without noticing. And it is this tough-minded grasp upon the actual which enables and indeed compels him, here, to settle for the canned music of 'Greensleeves' from an ice-cream van, as symbolizing politically something at least solid and merciful, whereas Scriabin's tone poem [...] orchestrates a politics which has proved itself both merciless (the murder of Trotsky) and nebulous'. (p. 78-79)

Davie returned to a reading of this poem in a discussion of Tomlinson and William Carlos Williams in *Under Briggflatts*. This later discussion makes again Davie's claim that post-war British poetry has accepted the quotidian realities of the welfare state rather than risk the poetic claim to a utopian future, but in doing so he also reveals some of the anxieties he feels about certain strands of

modernist aesthetics, anxieties which seem to focus on the figure of William Carlos Williams.

Davie begins by quoting Tomlinson's observation that, 'There is no occasion too small for the poet's celebration',[12] but immediately questions Tomlinson's claim: 'Commonsense, not without quite distinguished endorsement from past centuries, thinks that it is not true; that on the contrary there are occasions too trivial, too lacking in dignity or resonance, to deserve the ceremoniousness that, as Tomlinson rightly perceives, verse-writing always brings with it'. (p. 64) Davie's charge is that such poetry is portentous, and his example of the disasterous results that can follow from the observation of the dictum that any occasion, no matter how trivial, can be the object of the poet's celebration is Williams's 'The Red Wheelbarrow'. Davie's impatient dismissal of this 'little squib' is not lent any weight by his failure to consider it in the context of its place within the larger framework of Williams's seminal early modernist masterpiece *Spring and All*, but his remarks are significant in relation to his understanding of the social functions of poetry:

> Such poetry is invulnerable, existing in a self-sealed and self-justifying realm called "aesthetic", from which no appeal is allowed, or can be made, to other realms like the ethical or the civic. The literary histories invite us to associate such a belief in the unbreachable autonomy of art with haughty and disdainful decadents of the 1880s and 1890s. The achievement of Williams, of his followers and admirers, has been to show that the most secure haven for such doctrines is on the contrary in an ideology that is aggressively egalitarian, and also secular. A moment's thought shows that this must be true. For the belief that 'there is no occasion too small' is naturally at home in a society that makes no distinction between small occasions and big ones, a society that resists any ranking of certain human and civic occasions below or above certain others. Thus it is social democracy that cossets and protects the aesthete, as no other form of society does. Williams's 'It all depends' asserts and takes for granted the absence of any agreed hierarchies, hence the freedom of any individual to establish and assert his own hierarchy, without fear of being challenged. (pp. 64-65)

Williams explicitly rejects, in *Spring and All*, aesthetic theories which would enshrine the autonomy of the authentic art object, declaring 'I am not in search of "the beautiful illusion"', but this misunderstanding of Williams's poetics is

instructive.[13] Davie is suspicious of 'The Red Wheelbarrow' because, in his account, it by-passes established, and traditionally sanctioned, critical modes of evaluation, relying instead upon the unchallengeable assertions of aesthetic worth made by the self-proclaimed poet/genius. The link between the value of art and ethical and civic values has been cut, and for Davie this means that if the value of art is to be demonstrated the danger is that it will be shown to reside in the personality cult of the artist rather than in the work itself. Paradoxically, Davie sees the gestation of such a state of affairs in the unlikely social formation of a social democracy. The telling point here is that in a social democracy, committed to egalitarian principles, traditional hierarchies of value have been eroded. However, as we have seen, Davie argues that there is a peculiarly British antidote to this situation so that although a poet such as Charles Tomlinson 'has been called an aesthete [...] he can be shown to be nothing of the sort' (p. 65). Returning to a discussion of 'Prometheus',[14] Davie comments:

> In this rendering of a typical and commonplace scene from social-democratic England, the poet's distaste for the 'stale new frontier' is so evident that it is hard to believe he finds such scenes acceptable. (Should there not be legislation, he seems to protest, to prevent the archaic and lovely 'Greensleeves', being canned for dissemination by ice-cream vans?) And yet in its context as the last stanza of 'Prometheus', a poem about the Russian Revolution, the verses do assert that the architecturally squalid housing-estate, and the trader whose trademark is 'Greensleeves', must be tolerated. The oxymoron 'cruel mercy', taking up and intensifying the preceding oxymoron 'stale new', is meant in all earnest: if such inelegance and lack of refinement represent the price to be paid for avoiding the perfervid melodrama of revolutionary politics, then the bargain is a cruel one but the bargain must be struck, and we must be grateful that this option, in all its shabbiness, is mercifully open. For what is the alternative? It has been spelled out in previous stanzas, which have named Lenin and Trotsky, but also the musician Scriabin and the poet Blok. And it is the latter two, not the men of action but the men of art, who are held most responsible:
>
> > Scriabin, Blok, men of extremes,
> > History treads out the music of your dreams
> > Through blood
>
> One could hardly go further in denting the aesthete's (and the deconstructionist's) assumption that the artist is responsible to no one but himself [...] Tomlinson's vision, unyieldingly secular, is of a sort that frequently falls for political utopias; but his poem says that all such utopias are murderous. (pp. 66-67)

While it is perhaps not all that surprising to discover that Davie is able to recover Tomlinson's experiments with European and American modernism to the Hardyesque tradition, it is certainly remarkable that Davie is able to attempt to reclaim the early work of J.H. Prynne. Davie cheerfully admits that 'Prynne appears to have taken instruction from American practitioners of "composition by field", like Charles Olson and Edward Dorn' (p. 113). But he then goes on to argue that 'I would guess he [took] his bearings [also] from a native source, that is to say, from Hardy. For certainly, Prynne's emphasis is frequently on patience, on lowering the sights, settling for limited objectives' (p. 113). Davie supports this claim by quotation from Prynne's poem 'Questions for the Time Being', a poem, he says, which through its deployment of tropes of geological or geographical time scale links Prynne to Hardy and Auden and 'serves to reveal the absurdity of all forms of Utopian revolution' (p. 120):

> [...] what is anyone waiting
> for, either resigned or nervous or frantic from
> time to time? Various forms dodge through
> the margins of a livelihood, but so much talk
> about the underground is silly when it would re-
> quire a constant effort to keep below the surface,
> when almost everything is exactly that, the
> mirror of a would-be alien who won't see how
> much he is at home. In consequence also the
> idea of change is briskly seasonal, it's too cold
> & thus the scout-camp idea of revolution stands in
> temporary composure, waiting for spring. All
> forms of delay help this farce, that our restrictions
> are temporary & that the noble fiction is to have
> a few good moments, which represent what we know
> ought to be ours. Ought to be, that makes me
> wince with facetiousness: we/you/they, all the
> pronouns by now know how to make a sentence
> work with ought to, and the stoic at least saves
> himself that extremity of false vigilance.[15]

Paraphrasing parts of this extract from the poem, it is perhaps possible to see what Davie finds here to support his argument. The 'underground', that vague coalition of heterogeneous groups committed to various forms of liberation (political, sexual, aesthetic), is 'so much talk' because its very existence is a misrecognition of reality, 'a constant effort to keep below the surface' sustained by a failure to accept that this perspective on reality is a distorted image, a

reflection seen through the 'mirror of a would-be alien who won't see how much he is at home'. On this reading Prynne could be taken to be saying something that is central to Davie's thesis. If only we would accept what common sense tells us, that we are already 'at home', we can avoid that 'extremity of false vigilance' that we must endure, and inflict upon others, if we waste our time waiting for 'what we know ought to be ours' to turn up. Avant-garde and 'underground' aesthetics "makes strange" what is in fact our shared "home" in order to create that distance/space necessary for a revolutionary politics. The 'Hardyesque' aesthetic of Larkin, and on Davie's reading, Fisher, on the other hand, is to be valued because it unquestionably accepts that we are already 'at home'. While the poetry of Tomlinson and Prynne is marked with the influence of modernism, they too turn away from the vatic mode. Renouncing the example of Pound and his contempories, and following the example of Hardy, they resign themselves to a contingent reality, ice cream vans and all.

But clearly this is a very selective reading of Prynne's poem. In particular it avoids the poem's problematisation of the collective pronoun. While the poem explicitly censures the claim to know what ought to be ours/yours/theirs in the context of the radical demands of the 'underground', it implicitly questions the totalising gesture behind any assertion of the collective pronoun to know what is or ought to be. Far from endorsing Davie's argument that the stoic, exemplified by Larkin's poetry of 'reduced expectations' can unproblematically claim to know what the world is like, Prynne's poem rather serves to uncover the presumptuousness of any such claim, and to suggest that it should be distrusted.

The open forms of a Prynne poem ought to alert Davie to the dangers of producing such a closed reading, and Davie's admission later in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* that '"The Ideal Star-Fighter"[16] [is] the only one of [Prynne's] recent poems which I think I understand' (pp. 179-180), suggests that Davie is uneasily aware of this difficulty. The resistance of the poem to the critic's reductive reading belatedly returns me to a consideration of the significance of Davie's irritable dismissal, as being 'hardly worth the candle', (p167) of Fisher's borrowings from the Russian Formalists. If Davie is correct to suggest that Fisher's formal experimentation derives from the example of the Russian

Formalists then his anxiousness to avoid any consideration of the implications of such indebtedness is apparent. For if Fisher's experimentation functions, in Formalist manner, to 'make strange' common sense perceptions of reality, he can no longer be claimed as representative of the 'Hardyesque sensibility', and Davie's thesis that there has been a sea change in British poetry falls down. Fisher's poems do not take reality for granted but undermine common sense representations, working in fact to 'de-Anglicise' the ways in which contemporary British poetry represents contemporary reality, suggesting the need for an engagement with the social and political determinants of that reality.

D.S. Marriott's discussion of Andrew Crozier's critique of the dominant poetic, in an essay reflecting upon the significance of the apparent difficulty of formally innovative work, is pertinent here since it touches on the impossibility of the adequation of form to experience and consequent impotence of the High Modernist retreat into negative critique.[17] Marriot refers to Crozier's account of the dominant poetic in his introduction to *A Various Art*. Crozier argues:

> For one thing, poetry, if it is an art, is an art in relation to language in general; its artifice is various, and its rules apply to specific rather than to general occasions. But the poets who altered taste in the 1950s did so by means of a common rhetoric that foreclosed the possibilities of poetic language within its own devices: varieties of tone, of rhythm, of form, of image, were narrowly limited, as were conceptions of the scope and character of poetic discourse, its relation to the self, to knowledge, to history, and to the world. Poetry was seen as an art in relation to its own conventions - and a pusillanimous set of conventions at that. It was not to be ambitious, or to seek to articulate ambition through the complex deployment of its technical means: imagery was either suspect or merely clinched an argument; the verse line should not, by the pressure its energy or shape might exert on syntax, intervene in meaning; language was always to be grounded in the presence of a legitimating voice - and that voice took on an impersonally collective tone. To its owner's satisfaction the signs of art had been subsumed within a closed cultural programme.[18]

Marriott comments on this passage at length. However, his important comments for my purposes are the following:

> poetic artifice acts as a primary form of mediation between everydayness and the world through its transposition of contingent

> events into socially significant relationships. In a world of greater and greater complexification, however, this transposition becomes antiquated if not impossible [...] if the world can no longer be grasped formally as proposed in traditional idealist aesthetics, then artistic creativity – or artifice – needs must be defined negatively in the civic sphere. (p. 137)

The pessimism of Marriott's description of contemporary poetics is not the end of the story. As Marriott suggests here, but does not develop further, the significance of formal innovation lies in its dramatisation of the encounter between consciousness and its social and linguistic constituents. As Edward Larrissy has suggested, 'the poem can become an exploration of the way in which consciousness intersects with, or discovers itself in, the social discourses that are to hand'.[19] The drama resides precisely in the gap between language and the world. If there were no gap then the world would truly be as described by Davie's 'This is how it is!'. Fortunately the division between consciousness and being, usefully described by Andrew Lawson in his discussion of *A Various Art*, makes this conservative correspondence of language and reality an impossibility.[20] This need not, however, as Lawson suggests, result in political quietism since, as in the work of Roy Fisher, the gap between language and world can be exploited by the formal dislocations of his modernist aesthetics which can reveal the transformational possibilities of the imagination capable of shaking off the chains of dominant consensual ways of seeing the world that are enshrined in Davie's Hardyesque compromise with the real.

Endnotes

[1] Sean O'Brien, *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, (London: Picador, 1998), p.129.
[2] Roy Fisher, in *Paul Lester and Roy Fisher: A Birmingham Dialogue*, (Birmingham: Protean, 1986), p. 21.
[3] Roy Fisher, *Poems 1955-1987*, (Oxford: OUP, 1988).
[4] Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp.153-154.
[5] Roy Fisher, *City*, first published by Migrant Press, (Worcester,1961); My reference is to *The Dow Low Drop: New and Selected Poems*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996), pp. 16-17. All subsequent quotations from Fisher will be to this edition.
[6] *New Lines*, ed. by Robert Conquest, (London: Macmillan, 1956), p. 65.
[7] George Berkeley, quoted in Donald Davie, *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum*, ed. by Barry Alpert, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), p. xi.
[8] Alpert, p. xi.
[9] Roy Fisher, *The Dow Low Drop*, p. 19.
[10] Roy Fisher, *19 Poems and an Interview*, (Pensnett: Grosseteste Press,1977), p. 19.
[11] Roy Fisher, 'And then back to Sparkbrook', an interview with David Hart, *Arts Report: The Arts Newspaper of the West Midlands*, June 1986, p. 10.
[12] Charles Tomlinson, in Donald Davie, *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain 1960-1988*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p 64.
[13] William Carlos Williams, *Spring And All*, in *Imaginations*, ed., by Webster Schott, (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 89.
[14] Charles Tomlinson, *Collected Poems*, (Oxford: OUP, 1987), pp. 156-157.
[15] J.H. Prynne, *Poems*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1999), pp. 112-113.
[16] Prynne, p. 165.
[17] D.S. Marriott, 'The Rites of Difficulty', in *Fragmente: a magazine of contemporary poetics*, 7 (1997), 118-137.
[18] Andrew Crozier, in *A Various Art*, ed. by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, (London: Paladin, 1990), p. 12.
[19] Edward Larrissy, 'Poets of *A Various Art*', in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed., by James Acheson and Romana Huk, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp.63-79 (p. 66).
[20] Andrew Lawson, 'On Modern Pastoral', *Fragmente: a magazine of contemporary poetics*, 3 (1991), 35-41.

Conclusion: 'A cognitive Map?'

I have stressed mapping here because I think it is a particularly useful metaphor of the sort of knowledge that the history of contemporary British poetry can reveal. Jean-Francois Lyotard writes in a well known passage from his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*:

> A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass.[1]

The texts of contemporary British poetry exist in a 'fabric of relations' which form what I have described, following Sean O'Brien, as a 'family row' between the conservative mainstream and radical margin of post-war poetry. It is my claim that the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry, its disputes as to canonicity and the questions it asks of the representational status of poetic language, works to foreground questions of the relationship between poetic form and experience. If attention is paid to the way in which poems from both sides of the 'false binary' work through this problem of the relationship of form to experience, then, I suggest the texts of contemporary British poetry can be seen as 'nodal points' for unravelling the 'specific communication circuits' that locate our selves: they help us to map the world in which we live.

Clearly, this idea of the poem as map draws on Fredric Jameson's elaboration of the notion of 'cognitive mapping'. Brian McHale has succinctly described what Jameson means by this term:

> This notion arises in the context of [Jameson's] discussion of the postmodern problem of how we are to represent to ourselves the world-system in which we live. That world-system, the system of late or multinational capitalism, is of a complexity and ubiquity that defy our best efforts to grasp and master it imaginatively. But if we cannot represent the late-capitalist world-system to ourselves - this is Jameson's ultimate concern - what hope can we have of imagining ways to resist and change it? Current forms of picturing this world-system are inadequate to our needs because

> they undertake to model the world-system at the level of content and theme alone, while what is really required is formal innovation which would make modelling possible at the level of form. What is needed, says Jameson, borrowing a term from the urbanist Kevin Lynch, is a new 'cognitive mapping' of the postmodern world.[2]

Jameson offers as an example of formal innovation adequate to the cognitive mapping of the postmodern world the postmodernist house that the architect Frank Gehry built for himself and his family in Santa Monica in 1979. This is a building that juxtaposes traditional materials with references to High-Modernism, and undercuts both by utilising the found objects of junk culture. The significance for Jameson of this paradigmatic self-reflexivity of the Gehry House is the way in which it enables, at the level of form, an experience of the postmodern condition, as McHale points out:

> The Gehry House is a cognitive map, but a map in four dimensions, incorporating, in addition to the three dimensions of its architectural space, the fourth of time: the duration of lived experience in and of the house, which maps the experience of living in the space of postmodern society. The Gehry House, Jameson concludes in a striking turn of phrase, constitutes 'the attempt to think a material thought'. (p. 28)

McHale is right to highlight the importance of Jameson's phrase, 'a material thought'. The importance of this is its indication of the crucial role Jameson assigns to the concept of cognitive mapping as exemplified by the Gehry House in his attempt to elaborate a political strategy adequate to the complexities of the postmodern world. As McHale has pointed out, Jameson's ultimate concern is with the difficulty of representing the world-system of late-capitalism to ourselves. The formal innovations of the Gehry House enable Jameson to offer the hypothesis of cognitive mapping as an aesthetic practice capable of such representation. It allows the possibility of the fusion of theoretical reflection and lived experience which would, Jameson tentatively suggests, enable a political engagement with our postmodern condition:

> An aesthetic of cognitive mapping - a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system - will necessarily have to respect this now enormously complex representational dialectic and invent radically new forms in order to do it justice. This is not then, clearly, a call for a return to some

> older and more transparent national space, or some more traditional and reassuring perspectival or mimetic enclave: the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object - the world space of multinational capital - at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginative new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale.[3]

Brian McHale's essay, 'Making (non)sense of postmodernist poetry', develops Jameson's discussion of the Gehry House and cognitive mapping in order to suggest a way of linking it to the formal innovations of 'postmodern' poetry. McHale transposes Jameson's account of the Gehry House, couched as it is in terms of architecture, into an engagement with contemporary poetics via an examination of the way in which the formal innovations of much recent poetry could be said to engage in the process of making non-sense. Noting that the Gehry House has been described by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley as 'deconstructivist architecture' (quoted in McHale p. 28), McHale suggests that it might better be described as 'nonsense architecture' (p. 28). 'Nonsense', understood as the positive, valuable, and difficult act of seeking to evade sense, is the category through which McHale attempts to read what he considers to be the postmodern poetry of John Ashberry, J.H. Prynne, and Charles Bernstein. By it he intends to indicate the way in which these postmodern poems through formal innovation characteristically resist cultural codes of sense making. This he suggests has been read in two ways by critics. It is either seen as a metapoetic practice, producing a poetry about poetry. Or it is seen as a subversive act of the demystification of common-sense interpretative strategies. Through close readings of Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis', Prynne's 'Of Movement Towards a Natural Place', and Bernstein's 'Live Acts' McHale demonstrates that neither of these accounts (he has in mind in particular Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* and the theoretical writings of the Language poets) are satisfactory. On the one hand the metapoetic reading, through homing in on aspects of the poems that can be read in this way, leaves too much of the poetry unaccounted for, on

the other hand the subversive reading reduces the entirety of the poem to the restatement of the reiterated theme of the demystification of current language practices. McHale wonders, 'Is there no way postmodernist nonsense can be valued for itself?' (p25).

The answer to this question, McHale suggests, is to read postmodernist nonsense poetry neither simply as metapoetic commentary, nor reductively as linguistic demystification, but more complexly as, '"translations" of the architectural discourse of the Gehry House into verbal discourse':

> Just as the Gehry House 'quotes' and displays the original vernacular house, so postmodernist poems like 'Metamorphosis", 'Of Movement Towards a Natural Place', and 'Live Acts' quote and display 'poetry', both through parodic literary allusions or pastiches and through foregrounded features of 'literary language' (lineation, metre, figurative language, apostrophe, etc). Just as the Gehry House abruptly juxtaposes the heterogeneous building materials, so these poems juxtapose technical registers, colloquial language, bureaucratese - in short, a sampling of the discourses which circulate in our world, as well as bits of verbal residue or junk, intractably antiabsorptive elements. Just as the wrapping of one structure around another in the Gehry House creates a disquieting interior space, so too do these postmodernist poems. (pp. 28-29)

Speculatively McHale asserts that, like the Gehry House, the 'disquieting interior space' of these poems aspires 'to think a material thought' (p. 29). In doing so they 'project on to the world of human culture a map for the reader to read himself or herself into, a cognitive tool for finding our ways - and for finding our "selves"? - in the hyperspace of postmodern culture' (p. 29).

Both Jameson's and McHale's accounts of cognitive mapping are useful to my project. Jameson's central concern, how to imagine a mode of representation adequate to the task of representing the late-capitalist world-system to ourselves, is an important component of what I am describing as the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry. In particular, Jameson's quest for a mode of representation 'adequate' to the experience of postmodernity resonates with similar statements of a need to find a means of adequating form to experience made by contemporary poets. Seamus Heaney, for instance, has famously and

influentially formulated his poetic task as 'being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament'.[4] The crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry is felt most keenly, as I will demonstrate, at those points at which the adequation of form to experience is disputed.

McHale's essay, by extending Jameson's ideas into a discussion of poetics, offers suggestive ways of reading contemporary British poetry. However, McHale's shift of ground, from Jameson's discussion of architecture to an analysis of contemporary poetics, is problematic. It seems odd that McHale, who is best known for his formulation of a postmodern dominant that is concerned with ontological concerns rather than those of epistemology, should argue that a postmodern poetics is best understood as providing a 'cognitive tool' to map postmodern hyperspace. Furthermore, in his discussion of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism Jameson famously identifies the formally innovative poetics of the Language school, whom he suggests 'have adopted schizophrenic fragmentation as their fundamental aesthetic', as a symptom of postmodernism's crisis of representation rather than as an aspect of the new aesthetic of cognitive mapping that might offer some political purchase on our experience of late-capitalism' (p. 28). This suggests not only difficulties with McHale's use of Jamesons's concept of cognitive mapping in relation to contemporary poetics, but points to well known problems with Jameson's formulations of the postmodern and cognitive mapping. McHale's suggestion that postmodern poetry might function as a 'cognitive tool for finding our ways - and for finding our "selves"? - in the hyperspace of postmodern culture' is clearly intended to signal at least the possibility of such a poetry's oppositional stance towards that culture. Jameson's designation of it as symptom, however, preemptively recuperates any such oppositional stance to the mere working out of the cultural logic of the economic system it ostensibly is intended to challenge. Jameson's totalising vision of the postmodern condition seems to render any oppositional practice impotent. Furthermore it places a heavy burden on the new political art of cognitive mapping, charged as it is with the task of rising above postmodernism's crisis of representation to 'endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system' from which 'we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and

regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion' (p. 54). Such are the Olympian heights that this vision demands of the aesthetic of cognitive mapping that it might be supposed that any capacity to act against the postmodern malaise will be postponed indefinitely.

Jameson's diagnosis of, and cure for, the postmodern condition are too totalising. His conclusions, bound into this vision of totality, are too debilitating for the more modest claims I wish to assert for the map that the crisis of representation in contemporary British poetry can reveal. Equally, McHale's account of postmodern poetics, to the extent that it follows Jameson's attempt to 'think a material thought', is also locked into this debilitatingly totalising perspective. By reading the disquieting interior spaces of postmodern poems as translations of the architectural discourse of the Gehry House into verbal discourse, McHale seems to follow Jameson in wishing to ascribe to formal innovation the possibility of achieving some new Olympian height from which to critique late-capitalist society. The problem here, I suggest, is with the question McHale asks of postmodern poetry in order to avoid what he sees as the over-simplified and reductive readings of it as either metapoetic commentary or subversive demystification of current language practices: 'Is there no way postmodernist nonsense can be valued for itself?' McHale is wrong to attempt to argue that postmodernist nonsense poems can be valued for themselves in isolation from the other texts that are constitutive of contemporary British or American poetry. This points to another difficulty with Jameson's totalising vision of postmodernism that is also shared by HcHale's account of postmodern poetics. Both critics are too ready to read globalisation in economic terms as effacing important national differences in cultural terms. Although the lines of trans-Atlantic influence make up one important 'nodal point' in debates around contemporary British poetics, it is important to realise that the poetry (to use McHale's examples) of John Ashbery, Charles Bernstein, and J.H. Prynne can not be read simply as 'postmodern' without regard to the context of their own national location. The texts of Prynne, and other British formal innovators, are situated within the network of relationships that describes the history of post-war British poetry, and which must inflect them in significantly different ways to

American texts with which they share some formal characteristics. All of these texts exist in a fabric of relations whose tangled web of disputes as to canonicity and the representational status of poetic language itself, provide, I suggest, an interesting map of the vagaries of the contemporary self.

While McHale's translation of the architectural discourse of the Gehry House into a discussion of contemporary poetics is beset with difficulties, the metaphor of the building has been used usefully to offer an image of the state of contemporary British poetry. Jonathan Raban, in his 1971 survey *The Society of the Poem*, asks his readers to 'Imagine a large, rambling house, with every room decorated in a different style.' He goes on to list a curious set of eccentric and outlandish denizens inhabiting these various rooms who, in quaintly 70s demotic, refuse to have anything to do with one another. He concludes that: 'The house of poetry has been split up into flats; it has proliferated into a series of separate and mutually exclusive conceptual worlds [...] The language in which poetry is discussed has, like the language of poetry itself, fragmented into a series - or more accurately, a jumble - of competing dialects.[5]

While Raban's description is a caricature, and the situation in the 1990s is somewhat different to that at the beginning of the 1970s, Raban's sketch captures some of the flavour of the quirkiness and resentment that characterises post-war British poetry. However, the key point I want to discuss in Raban's account is his stress upon the lack of communication between the various 'flats' that make up the 'house' of contemporary British poetry. What I want to suggest is that although Raban is right to point out that the constitutive groupings have all too often refused to listen to one another, he is wrong to intimate that there has been no contact between them at all. The 'competing dialects' that Raban describes have in fact been at considerable pains to maintain their 'mutually exclusive conceptual worlds' through a sustained and frequently hostile exchange of claim and counter claim that Raban, later in his discussion, characterises as 'a confused and frequently vituperative pamphlet war between the centre and its extremes' (p. 77). It is this embattled dialogue, with its disputes as to canonicity and the representational status of poetic language itself, that provides a map with which it is possible to chart the journeys of a variety of contemporary selves across the

complex terrain of the post-war period.

Endnotes

[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, p. 15.
[2] Brian McHale, 'Making (non)sense of postmodernist poetry', in *Language, Text and Context: Essays in Stylistics*, ed., by Michael Toolan, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 6-36, p. 27.
[3] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), p. 54.
[4] Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling Into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (London: Faber, 1984), pp. 41-60, p. 56.
[5] Jonathan Raban, *The Society of the Poem*, (London: Harrap, 1971), pp. 61-62.

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