

## NEW INVENTION: SOME RECENT BRITISH AND IRISH POETRY

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**Abstract:** The paper describes contemporary British English language poetry. An analysis of the domination of narrative poetry and plain speech beginning with The Movement of the 1950s is made and its lasting effect into the 1990s even upon a widening of the constituency for poetry to women poets, poets from outside the metropolitan Oxbridge nexus, poets from ethnic minorities. There is a brief account of opposition to mainstream poetic practice by the British Poetry Revival before current poetries, which sidestep the old opposition of narrative verse and American-derived modernism, are described.

**Key words:** Movement, invention, poetry, mainstream, experimental

### Introduction

The group of poets known as the Movement was the most intellectually fashionable coterie in Britain in the 1950s. The Movement has had a long and controversial history in the practice of poetry and criticism of poetry over the last fifty-five years or so. It is even claimed that it still has an influence on the practice of poetry, its publication and reception by the public. Some commentators hold with a startling vehemence that the Movement has had deleterious effect on English language poetry in the British Isles with the suppression of original talents whose practice differed from that of the Movement. Moreover, they hold that the Movement's establishment connections prevent the emergence of more vital forms of poetry: "Efficiently, unhindered by artistic projects, they crawled into positions where they could repress poetry and promote each other." (Duncan 2003:48)

A theoretical basis emerged as a reaction against Eliot's notion that contemporary poetry "must be difficult" and against the wordy obscurities of the 1940s, which was impelled by the notions of clarity advocated by George Orwell in his essays, a close reading style developed out of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and Donald Davie's *Purity of Diction in English Verse* published in 1952. Davie was one of the nine poets in the *New Lines* anthology and became the chief theoretician of the Movement. In *Purity of Diction* Davie explored the notion of good and bad diction. "Presumably if a bad diction is the result of selecting from the language at random, according to the whim of fashion, then good diction comes from making

a selection from the language on reasonable principles and for a reasonable purpose.” (Davie 2006:7) Davie’s examples were drawn from eighteenth century poets partly in an effort to restore the critical reputation of Augustan poetry by demonstrating how partial were Wordsworth’s comments in the Introduction to *Lyrical Ballads* on Augustan diction and indeed how much in common Wordsworth’s diction had with the Augustans. A significant epithet in Davie’s argument was “reasonable” and reasonableness as opposed to the instinctive drives and emotional expression of the poetry of Dylan Thomas underpinned much of the poetry of the Movement. In his introduction to *New Lines* Robert Conquest wrote “we see a refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensible language, even when the verse is most highly charged with sensuous or emotional intent.” (Conquest 1956: xv)

The poetry of the Movement required a high level of prosodic competence. It was well-wrought, consistent in tone, with an easily traceable line in rhetorical argumentation, and economical in metaphor with no arbitrary departures from a central image.

The publication of Al Alvarez’s *The New Poetry* in 1962 indicated that the Movement had strong rivals. Alvarez himself began as an Oxford graduate and Movement poet. *The New Poetry* introduced the poetry of the Americans John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The poetry of psychological risk that Alvarez advocated had a major impact on British poetry in that the well-constructed Movement poem with a realist subject drawn from British life became expanded in terms of the psychological states and personae it explored. A second coterie of poets, *The Group*, whose members published in both the second edition of *New Lines* and *The New Poetry*. Like the original *New Lines* nine the impetus came from poets who had been taught at Oxbridge, particularly at Cambridge under the rigorous teaching of F. R. Leavis. The intensive, often grueling dissection of an individual’s work was wholly beneficial in creating a generation of technically brilliant poets. The impact of the methodology was later transmitted outside London when members of the Group took up academic posts in provincial universities. Philip Hobsbaum (1932 – 2005) led a workshop in the University of Belfast which included the young Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, three of the major poets in the Irish renaissance of the late 1960s. Hobsbaum went on to repeat his success at Glasgow University with a generation of Scottish poets emerging in the 1970s and 1980s. A number of Group poets were Gregory Fellows at Leeds University, where young poets, including the writer of this article, were encouraged to bring their work for scrutiny at an

informal seminar led by the Gregory Fellow. Peter Redgrove (1932 – 2003) encouraged a generation of artist poets at Dartington Art College. It can be said the Group played a major part in encouraging the emergence of poetry outside the Oxbridge-London axis. Moreover, Ted Hughes was one of the founders of the Arvon Foundation, the first major organisation devoted to Creative Writing in Great Britain. Its influence has been immense.

One of the failings of the Movement was the lack of attention paid to women poets. Both editions of *New Lines* only published Elizabeth Jennings. Similarly Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry* had only two women poets, both American although Sylvia Plath was resident in England. There were a number of women poets published and two of them, Stevie Smith and Dame Edith Sitwell, had a public following. However, they were regarded as eccentrics as opposed to their 'normal' male counterparts. The emergence of major women poets in the 1980's, including Carol Ann Duffy, Selima Hill, Eavan Boland, Liz Lochhead, Grace Nichols, Helen Dunmore, Jo Shapcott, Mimi Khalvati, Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie and Gwyneth Lewis, was in due partly to the impact of feminism, but also due to the emergence of strong poetry publishing houses in the provinces for example Carcanet in Manchester and Bloodaxe in Newcastle and the activities of the Group in establishing workshops for mainstream poets.

Likewise the emergence of poetry from ethnic minorities, most noticeably women poets such as Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay, Mim Khalvati, Sujata Bhatt and Patricia Agabi as well Linton Kwesi Johnson, David Dabydeen, Frederic D'Aguair can be attributed to a combination of the extension of a poetic franchise in terms of region, gender and ethnicity from the 1970s.

Aesthetic opposition to the Movement with poetics derived from the Beats, Black Mountain and Concrete Poetry was centred in the British Poetry Revival (BPR). They had emerged partly from the counterculture of the 1960s and had long been marginalised following a brief and odd period in the 1970s when they controlled the Poetry Society. Their marginalisation was partly due to incompetence and partly from a desire to wear a hair shirt of public obscurity. Like the mainstream, women poets such as Maggie O'Sullivan, Denise Riley and Wendy Mulford emerged extending poetry into performance.

In my view, the content of poetry was widened. New narratives drawn from gender, a more liberal attitude towards sexuality, ethnic and regional diversity entered the mainstream. The mainstream gained a new empirical content, but without challenging the formal conventions of the Movement and the Group. There was an increasing freedom of

language and the disappearance of a genteel decorum in diction, but this was led by the novel, drama, increased media freedom and in the pop lyric.

In this light the anthologies, *The New Poetry* (1993) and *Conductors of Chaos* (1996) can be compared. *The New Poetry* claimed an extension in the varieties of English, but 47 out of 55 of their poets had poems which read in Standard English. It does not seem to have occurred to the editors that readers may not share the accent of the poets they are reading. The parameters of the Movement are still evident, for example in Bernard O'Donoghue, his narrative encompassing a rural background, with drama understated to the point of invisibility. (Hulse et al 1993.87) Two other poets, Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage display the nostalgia complained of by Alvarez in the new Poetry of 1962, but it is not the *Downton Abbey* nostalgia of Larkin's *At Grass*, but a nostalgia for childhood. Strip away the tough veneer of Duffy's and Armitage's language, the one-word sentences, the sometimes louche or unpoetical subjects as in respectively Duffy's *Psychopath* or Armitage's *Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid* and we have a poetry which fulfills Eliot's presentiment in the 1940s that the poetry of the future would be written in a verse of a four or five stress line.

The *Conductors of Chaos* was conceived in opposition to the mainstream and to what was perceived as the hegemony of Movement poetics. I would not go so far as to claim that the Movement has stifled alternative poetic practice as there is something in the audience for poetry in Britain's reception of poetry which is comfortable with a style where narrative and a varied blank verse are the staple techniques for poetry. The extension of the content of poetry in the 1980s has perhaps reinforced the prevalence of traditional technique. *The Conductors of Chaos* also in an unambiguous gesture at the Movement sought to restore the reputation of the neglected poets of the 1940s. The anthology contains selections from the work of JF Hendry, WS Graham, David Jones, David Gascoyne and Nicholas Moore, who with the exception of WS Graham are still neglected poets after an initial burst of fame. David Jones once had a reputation little short of that of Eliot and Pound as a modernist, but I am puzzled as to why Nicholas Moore has been revived. There is more than a trace of taking up arms on behalf of a perceived hapless victim. Moore's obscurity after the 1940s was not just due to a change in poetic fashions, but personal factors contributed. *The Conductors of Chaos* includes a selection from the master of the Cambridge school, Jeremy Prynne, a formidably difficult poet to interpret. The rapidly shifting registers' often more than once in a single line, the

syntactical contortions seem at odds with what reads like a mainstream blank verse line. It's as though he has freed himself of conventional linear sense, but remains in thrall to the pentameter. This is not a constraint on the poetry of Denise Riley, Geraldine Monk and Maggie O'Sullivan in the same anthology. However, it seems from Iain Sinclair's introduction that the animus against the Movement which informs the polemic of *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, an animus directed at a straw target when the real enemy was the contemporary mainstream poetry of the 1990s, not that of the 1950s.

In this light the omission from the anthology of Christopher Middleton, who published in the 1940s and then not again until 1962 when he re-emerged with poetic style radically different from his early neo-romantic work, is not surprising. Middleton's own poetics circumvent the opposition of a modernism informed by the American Beats and Black Mountain poetry to mainstream British narrative. Neil Corcoran in *English Poetry Since 1940* deploys the term neo-modernist to describe Middleton's work. In his poetry Middleton seeks a way out of the empirical narrative and what he terms „anecdote“ of the mainstream. (Corcoran 1993: 166) He and the late W.S. Graham I would cite as presiding spirits for the most compelling poetry of the last fifteen years. To them I would add Roger Langley, Geoffrey Hill, Jo Shapcott and Denise Riley.

Before I move on to contemporary poetry I would also cite the rise of the Creative Writing course industry, which has established itself in Britain over the last twenty years. Long an established feature of the American university campus Creative writing is everywhere in British education from primary education all the way up to PhD level. I read an article where an American writer wondered how much work was available for an estimated 60,000 creative writers in America. In Britain I get the impression that one's chances of publication are now materially helped through undertaking a Creative writing course although there is the expected British intellectual scepticism about the professional training of writers.

The impact of Creative Writing courses seems to have reinforced mainstream practice among young poets. There is pressure to secure prizes for young writers coming off such courses and as the judges tend to be mainstream, even conservative poets, with national reputations such as Duffy, Armitage, O'Donoghue, Szirtes, Lewis and so on and the prize winners tend to reflect their style of writing. Followers of Denise Riley and Jeremy Prynne

don't win the National Poetry Competition or the Arvon Competition with Selima Hill and John Hartley Williams the exceptions that prove the rule.

In the last fifteen years the opposition between the mainstream and experimental poets. Publishers such as Carcanet, Salt, Bloodaxe, and Shearsman have helped to bring this about by publishing experimental poets alongside more commercial poets.

The hegemony of the narrative poem spiced up with the rural lyric in a sub-Ted Hughes mode now has serious challengers notably in the work of Andy Brown, John Hartley-Williams, Michael Haslam, Helen Ivory, Alasdair Paterson, and Elaine Randell whose work exhibits a wide range of styles and which regards language not as a vehicle to deliver empirical experience but part of the experience of a poem. Brown and Hartley-Williams use techniques learnt from surrealism and the OuLiPo group where arbitrary choice of sign rather than the prevailing naturalist mode of British poetry operates. Michael Haslam has burrowed into unfashionable poetry such as that of Edmund Spenser to create a new form of contemporary lyric. Ivory draws on European visual artists, such as the Czech animator, Jan Svankmajer. Alasdair Paterson departs from history with his last collection, „on the governing of empires“ being an imaginary replacement of the lost books of the Byzantine emperor, Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Elaine randell draws on her work as a Social worker to recreate the voices rather than the narratives of abused and deserted women.

These poets demonstrate a great range in the language they employ both in terms of its surface textures of syntax and vocabulary and in subject matter without reverting to the low mimetic of mainstream British narrative verse. A focus on the poem as an artistic structure as opposed to a vehicle to convey linear, narrative meaning now seems to be yielding work which takes up the gains made by the modernists of the nineteen-twenties.

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