Introduction: Situating Contemporary Poetry

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It is difficult to think of any subject on which a short collection of essays could truly claim to be comprehensive. However, this instalment of the *Yearbook of English Studies* can make a particularly strong and jubilant claim against comprehensiveness. Readers will find that its discussions range across a variety of poetic work, by a selection of poets who I hope will blend the familiar with the as-yet-unread. Nonetheless, one can easily imagine the same *Yearbook* with a wholly different set of poets and an equal (or even greater) claim to be representative of contemporary British and Irish poetry. This by no means detracts from the usefulness of the following essays or the importance of the poetry examined. Rather, it reflects the enormity and variety of contemporary poetry: an object of study that, by definition, is still emerging and developing as this volume goes to print. Rather than setting out any prescriptive criteria of what seems the most valuable or important work, this collection of discussions can be taken as an affirmation of the vitality of contemporary poetry, some of which we hope bleeds through into the critical writing that attends it.

The last volume of the *Yearbook of English Studies* to focus on contemporary poetry was published in 1987.[1] Although its remit was 'British Poetry Since 1945', it featured a strong showing of Irish poetry, with Seamus Heaney prominently occupying two of the contributions, and cropping up in multiple others. Poetry from Wales was not represented at all. The slipperiness of the word 'British' (sometimes accompanied by the occlusion of a

[1] *The Yearbook of English Studies,* 17 (1987), British Poetry since 1945 Special Number.

whole nation) is a familiar story in twentieth-century poetry criticism, and particularly comes to the fore in criticism's sibling, the poetry anthology. Andrew Michael Roberts notes how a general shift from 'England' to 'Britain' to 'the British Isles' as the geographical focus of anthologies 'tells its own story of an increasing self-consciousness about the complexity of cultural identity in the late twentieth century'.[2] Meanwhile, Robert Crawford highlights the role of anthologies in contributing to national identity and memory: 'especially over the last few centuries, the dominant form of the poetry anthology has related to the nation'; '[t]he map, the dictionary, the anthology, all these are collections of linguistic and cultural resources which the nation uses to remember itself'.[3] We might say that poetry, criticism, and anthologies all enter an implicit debate over the make-up of cultural and national identities. One catalyst for increased self-awareness of this process was Seamus Heaney's famous objection to being included in an anthology of 'British' poetry: 'be advised / My passport's green';[4] though, as Tracy J. Prince notes, '[Heaney's] work had previously appeared in at least six anthologies with the word "British" in the title'.[5] He would continue to figure as a touchstone of 'British poetry', including in 1987's *Yearbook.* In the realm of

[2] Andrew Michael Roberts, 'The Rhetoric of Value in Recent British Poetry Anthologies', in *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value,* ed. by Jonathan Allison and Andrew Michael Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp. 101–22 (p. 107).

[3] Robert Crawford, 'Poetry, Memory and Nation', in *Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Barbara Korte, Stefanie Lethbridge, and Ralf Schneider (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 193–209 (pp. 195, 201).

[4] Seamus Heaney, *An Open Letter* (Derry: Field Day, 1983).

[5] Tracy J. Prince, *Culture Wars in British Literature: Multiculturalism and National Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), p. 58.

anthologies, 1998–2001 saw a significant shift toward 'British and Irish', where 'British' and previously 'English' had been the norm.[6] This *Yearbook* follows that current critical tendency, hoping to showcase a range of British and Irish poetry, whilst acknowledging the complexities and tensions within those terms.

This discussion of terminology is far from purely semantic, as it points to the experiences of place and identity that inform so much contemporary poetry. As Eric Falci notes, '[t]he importance of place in contemporary British poetry is a well-worn critical path […] for good reason. Poets have been obsessed with it'.[7] This is true of poets right across the spectrum of contemporary verse, as evidenced in the first section of this volume, **'Place, Identity, Environment'.** Daniel Hughes opens proceedings by reclaiming a space for the Welsh poet Tony Conran as a major figure of twentieth-century writing. Conran's late-career work, *Castles* (1993) is analysed as a work of elegiac modernism, whilst its roots in the Welsh landscape and the history of English occupation are accounted for. In the subsequent discussion, Devon Campbell-Hall takes a different approach to colonial legacies, examining how Raman Mundair's poetry navigates her experience as a British-Asian woman in contemporary Britain. Campbell-Hall illustrates how poetry can reclaim agency not only over one's personal sense of identity and place, but also over the wider debate of what it means

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[6] See, in particular, *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland After 1945*, ed. by Sean O'Brien (London: Picador, 1998); *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, ed. by Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford (London: Viking, 1998)*; Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970*, ed. by Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain; *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Keith Tuma (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[7] Eric Falci, *The Cambridge Introduction of British Poetry, 1945–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 121.

to be British. Moving us from the nation to the natural environment, Bridget Vincent's contribution marks a transitional point between poethics and poetries of place. In Geoffrey Hill's late writing, Vincent suggests, his preoccupations with the ethics of linguistic utterance are brought to bear on questions of perception and attention, including the acts of observation with which poets approach the natural world. This connection between poets and the environment opens fully onto an ecocritical aspect in Yvonne Reddick's discussion of Karen McCarthy Woolf. Rather than any straightforward environmentalist message, McCarthy Woolf's *Seasonal Disturbances* (2017) is shown to offer a response to climate change and the Anthropocene through its complex interweaving of poetic form, ecology, urbanism, economics, gendered experience, and more.

There are evidently geographical, cultural, and political ramifications to the old habit of writing about 'English', 'British', and even 'British and Irish' poetry. However, these complications are also linguistic. In criticism of the early twentieth century, it is often comfortably assumed that 'English poetry' represents both the poetry of the English nation and that of the English language. This perceived unity became increasingly problematic as the century progressed, for reasons that are many and diverse. These might include the increased exploration of Irish republicanism in poetry, the growing importance of Caribbean and black British writing, the collapse of the British empire in its conventional form, and the attention paid by linguists to the notion of plural Englishes. It is important to recognize that the poetry of England makes up only a part of English-language poetry, whilst the English language itself is only one component of British and Irish poetry. In the second section of this volume, '**Placing Language**', three essays explore the connections between the linguistic and geographical, whilst also giving some sense of the non-English presences in contemporary verse. Ian Davidson analyses how poetries of place are intimately informed

by the etymologies and ecologies of words. Davidson reads Rhys Trimble as traversing Welsh and English vocabularies, Lesley Harrison as entering the aquatic dialogue between Scotland and Scandinavia, and Tom Pickard as mining the Northumbrian depths of regional dialect. Peter Mackay takes us further beyond the limitations of English poetry, beginning with a critical account of Gaelic poetry's current standing and its complex relationship with contemporary Scotland. Analysing the work of Meg Bateman, Ruaraidh MacThòmais, Rody Gorman, and other poets, Mackay suggests that Gaelic poetry's anxiety of writing into a void is also an opportunity to utilize the rich possibilities of the linguistic medium. Closing this section of the volume, Robert Kiely investigates linguistic traces of Irish and Arabic in Catherine Walsh's *Optic Verve* (2009). Whilst Walsh's poetry sustains connections to the histories and habitats of Dublin, Kiely shows that its allusions to Arabic mathematics invite us to read algebraically in order to make sense of the poetry's complex, international materials.

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For the purposes of this volume, 'contemporary British and Irish poetry' has been taken to mean any poetic work produced in those regions within the period 1980–2021. There is quite an arbitrary reason for this date range: the 1987 volume of the *Yearbook of English Studies* engaged with the period from 1945 through to the 1980s, though was chiefly focused on poetry preceding that decade. Therefore, for both continuity and convenience, spotlighting the poetry of the past forty years seemed a sensible approach. Of course, 'contemporary' is a deceptively fraught term. In their historicist survey of British literature 1980–2000, Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene argue that 'the final two decades of the twentieth century no longer constitute an integral part of what we call the contemporary'.

Even those who lived through the 1980s and 1990s might be said to view them 'through a complex historicising lens', as a 'bygone world […] [s]uperseded and defamiliarised by previously unimaginable technologically modified ways of everyday living'.[8] This is a tantalizing proposition, though it seems questionable that any individual is in a position to comprehend their own lifetime in an historical manner. Meanwhile, people from antiquity onward have perceived a 'bygone world' in the immediate past, which from another angle they seem contemporaneous with. As Raymond Williams wryly points out with his 'escalator' approach to an 'Old England' that keeps receding further and further back, 'What we have to enquire into is not […] historical error, but historical perspective.'[9] According to another line of contemporary thought, this volume's willingness to read literature at the scale of 'a national culture and its inhabitants, with a time frame of perhaps a few decades' is already woefully reductive.[10] As Timothy Clark suggests in seeking new, ecological ways of reading, '[v]iewed on very long time scales, human history and culture can take on unfamiliar shapes'.[11]

[8] Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene, 'Introduction', in *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*, ed. by Pollard and Schoene (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–27 (p. 1). For reference, the two chapters of the book relevant to the topic at hand are Luke Roberts, 'Strategies of Survival in Contemporary Experimental Poetry' (pp. 58–75) and James Underwood, '"Pit Closure as Art": Poetry from the North of England' (pp. 162–77).

[9] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 10.

[10] Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 100.

[11] Ibid., p. 101.

The third section of this volume, '**Ways of Looking Back**', may not answer the call for geological scales of reading; however, its essays each offer valuable forms of backward glances, whether enacted by criticism or by poetry itself. In her discussion of Alice Oswald, Sarah Kennedy shows that the contemporary poet's fluid and metamorphic approaches to nature are best understood through the classical presences that pepper her writing. Framing Oswald as part of the sustained engagement of contemporary poets with classical authors and their afterlives, Kennedy shows that the past is by no means done with, but is a vital component of the present. We may think here of Jonathan Culler's argument, that 'a striking feature of the history of literary forms is that, unlike social and political history, it is reversible'.[12] Such reversal finds a different meaning in Rory Waterman's discussion, as he explores the substantial body of 'para-poems' and parodies responding to the work of Philip Larkin. These texts hit upon a more immediate method of response to literary forebears. They may resist and even mock Larkin, but Waterman finds that they show astute attention to the older poet's work, whose influence on contemporary writing they continually affirm. Had Larkin lived into his 70s, or merely continued publishing poetry into the 1980s, he might have figured in this volume by more direct means. As it stands, Tony Conran, Geoffrey Hill, and Ted Hughes are the oldest poets to be discussed in the following essays. All three were born in the period 1930–32 and launched their poetry careers in the 1950s. Whilst these three men have enriched contemporary poetry in the late phases of their writing, most of their work stretches further back into that 'bygone world' of the last century. Not so with Eavan Boland, who was active from the 1960s but produced the majority of her work between 1980 and her recent death in 2020. Looking back at her work, Nicholas Taylor-

[12] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015; pbk 2017), p. 4.

Collins appraises not just its literary value, but the values of idealism, progress, and transgression it espouses. Reading Boland alongside the principles of Alfred Nobel, Taylor-Collins rewrites recent history just a little, with his suggestion that Boland should have been a Nobel Laureate.

If we wish to argue that our own sense of the contemporary is genuinely different from that of past cultures, we might find recourse to theories of postmodernity as a 'stalling of the engines which drive history itself', stranding us in an 'historical completion that is made of a kind of limitless change'.[13] However, even in acknowledging this view, Peter Boxall reserves the possibility 'that postmodernism perhaps did not happen at all, that the symptoms that we associate with it actually arise from an extended phase of late modernity whose historical characteristics and chronology are not yet measurable'.[14] So again we reach the question of where and when the contemporary takes place. Certainly, whilst 'the postmodern period […] lasts in fact a very short time indeed',[15] modernism as a literary movement seems never to have ended. For some time, perhaps modernism absented itself from Britain and Ireland, requiring poets to trace transatlantic lineages, as Allen Fisher suggests in an interview with Robert Hampson.[16] However, at least since the British Poetry Revival, there have been British and Irish poets in such a clear lineage with the modernist

[13] Peter Boxall, 'The Ends of Postmodernism', in *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000: Accelerated Times*, ed. by Pollard and Schoene, pp. 28–41 (p. 28).

[14] Ibid., p. 40.

[15] Ibid., p. 29.

[16] Allen Fisher and Robert Hampson, 'Skipping across the Pond: Interaction between American and British Poetries 1964–1970', in *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today*, ed. by Abigail Lang and David Nowell Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 41–57.

programme that the epithet 'postmodern' would seem asynchronous. David Nowell Smith and Abigail Lang suggest that these modernist legacies were 'long treated by the British literary mainstream as a historical aberration, thankfully now defunct'.[17] Meanwhile, such is the scarcity of genuinely, formally traditional poetry that David Caplan claims 'contemporary metrical verse surprises many learned readers simply by existing'.[18] Given the longstanding poetry wars between mainstream and experimental styles, it is unlikely these two views can ever be reconciled. We might take heed of Peter Howarth's suggestion, that 'the easier it is to show how war is not the answer, the more difficult it becomes to explain how contemporary poetry got itself stuck with such a rigid opposition in the first place'.[19] Certainly, modernist, postmodernist, or experimental modes of contemporary poetry are no

[17] David Nowell Smith and Abigail Lang, 'Introduction', in *Modernist Legacies*, ed. by Lang and Nowell Smith, pp. 1–14 (p. 1).

[18] David Caplan, *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

[19] Peter Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 1. For any readers who are baffled by the 'rigid opposition' of mainstream and experimental poetries, Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 222–61, offers an brief and accessible discussion that is largely still applicable today. More in-depth but partisan discussions include: Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006); Andrew Duncan, *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry*, Liverpool English Texts and Studies, 41 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005); Sam Ladkin and Robin Purves, 'An Introduction', *Chicago Review*, 53.1 (Spring 2007), 6–13; Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000*, Liverpool English Texts and Studies, 45 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

longer marginalized, in the limited sense that they do now receive attention from literary critics and educators, alongside traditional or mainstream poetry. The contributions to this *Yearbook* suggest as much. Another way of dividing up the mainstream and margins of British and Irish poetry would be to ask how narrow a range of poetry is supported by funding channels and/or accepted by major publishers. Peter Middleton has warned against the tendency 'to treat the poem as if its roots in publishing, the funding bodies that fertilized its growth, the readership that supported it, and the other institutions that made it possible could all be cut away without losing any of the significance of the poem itself'.[20] Of course, the kind of institutional research needed to rectify this requires great patience, as well as a skillset somewhat divorced from traditional literary criticism.

For Middleton, a 'typical page' of poetry from a major publisher gives an 'appearance of continuity' with the poetry of previous centuries, whilst 'scenes of aesthetic innovation […] often take place at other sites than the book-length collection'.[21] Many of the contributions to this volume begin to acknowledge the variety of forms that contemporary work can operate within, both on and off the page; but this is this especially true of those in the final section, '**Forms of Meaning**'. In his recent monograph, Robert Sheppard talks of 'the aesthetic "turn"' in his critical writing, which he situates somewhere in the 'choppy waters of revitalized formalism'.[22] The essays included in the current collection do not

[20] Peter Middleton, 'Institutions of Poetry in Postwar Britain', in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry,* ed. by Nigel Alderman and C. D. Blanton (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 243–63 (p. 243).

[21] Ibid., p. 244.

[22] Robert Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 4, 7.

commit explicitly to the new strains of formalism, but they do pay attention to specific, meaning-making forms of poetic practice. Robert Hampson takes a cross-generational approach to experimental poetry by women, in which the written text interacts with the visual, material, and performed. Beginning with Redell Olsen's media-spanning activities, Hampson traces a lineage through the work of Sophie Robinson, Prudence Chamberlain, and Nisha Ramayya, ending with a consideration of Alison Gibb and Karen Sandhu. Following this, James Underwood engages with the more familiar tradition of the verse epistle. Returning to the landmark publication of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998), Underwood foregrounds the mode of epistolarity, rectifying the tendency towards exclusively thematic and biographical readings. Robert Sheppard's discussion circles back to questions of performance, but also examines literary collaboration as an important formal practice. Attending to the kinds of doubleness produced by co-authorship, Sheppard reads the longstanding collaboration of Kelvin Corcoran and Alan Halsey alongside the fleeting encounters of S. J. Fowler's 'Enemies' and 'Camarades' events. Giving myself the last word, my own contribution analyses a selection of Zoë Skoulding's poetry as a case study for appreciating the complexities of the contemporary lyric genre. By exploring formulations of visual and spatial experience in Skoulding's poetry, and in her collaborative work with Ian Davidson, I suggest that the lyric mode can be understood as a spectrum of possible relationships between subject and object.

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The pieces of work contained in this volume were commissioned shortly before the global COVID-19 pandemic. Given the extra pressures of this period, the contributors to this *Yearbook* are especially deserving of my sincere thanks for producing excellent, expert

pieces of criticism during a difficult period. Of three commissioned essays that understandably fell by the wayside, two of them focused on black British poets. This resulted in a decreased diversity among the poets represented in this volume, which is regrettable and was certainly not by design. I wish also to extend my thanks to Andrew Hiscock for commissioning this instalment of the *Yearbook,* and for being an invaluable colleague and mentor. Finally, immeasurable thanks to my family, Lucy and Theo, for their support.