

Under Mercia

Eric Falci, *The Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry 1945–2010*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. vii+279 pp. £54.99 (pbk £17.99). ISBN 978-1-107-02963-7.

This introductory volume enters a marketplace that is crowded even within its publisher's own lists. With two chapters on modernism, Eric Falci risks some overlap with *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* (ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, 2007) and *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry* (by Peter Howarth, 2011). He might also tread on the toes of *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry* (ed. by Jane Dowson, 2011); and his chapter on Northern Ireland touches on the remit of *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (ed. by Matthew Campbell, 2003) and *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800–2000* (by Justin Quinn, 2008). Irish poetry, in fact, is Falci's chief specialism, as evidenced by his first book, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966–2010*, also published by Cambridge in 2012. We might further note that Falci's latest book shares a substantial number of poets with the landmark *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (ed. by Neil Corcoran, 2007). It also has a non-identical twin, *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945–2010* (ed. by Edward Larrissy, 2015), to which Falci contributes a chapter. Even a cursory round-up begs the question of whether we need another preparatory Cambridge volume on this topic, and what Falci might attempt to do differently.

Whilst the Cambridge 'Companions' offer a scattergram of their topic, each chapter lending an individual voice to the debate, the parallel 'Introductions' aim for a unified account. Falci, who is based at the University of California, Berkeley, is therefore faced with the task of surveying sixty-five recent years of British poetry in a way that acknowledges variety but also proffers a coherent narrative strand. The book's introduction begins this endeavour tepidly, with the obligatory nod to A. Alvarez's *The New Poetry* (1962). This touchstone of the period, remarkable mainly for its prevalence in critical narratives, needs a more nuanced analysis to be useful (of the type it begins to receive in Falci's contribution to Larrissy's volume). The introduction then gives potted accounts of British events and concerns leading into the post-war period, undoubtedly useful for orientating students: class tensions; political reform; the aftermath of empire; the USA and the cold war; the establishment of the EU and UN; feelings of nostalgia and loss. Later chapters of the book frequently return to such contexts and flesh them out through direct dialogue with the poetry. Falci's introduction is most important for presenting two key arguments, though it leaves them partly implicit. Firstly, that we must take 'Britishness' as a state of flux that the poets respond to and participate in. Secondly, that the 'close reading' of poetry is not a retreat from the idea of literature as engaged with politics and identity; rather, it is a tool for revealing the intricacies of that engagement. These principles run throughout Falci's study, and play a key part in allowing this book to present a single narrative – not by homogenising British poetry, nor by appealing vaguely to plurality, but by establishing explicit terms by which to understand difference and variety within this literature.

Chapter One gives an account of the Movement – its formation and its anthologies – which might be found in any extant account. However, the call for attentive close reading is followed through, and Falci offers nuanced analyses of Donald Davie's 'Remembering the Thirties' and Philip Larkin's 'Church Going', both of which are enlivened both formally and thematically. The chapter's

Freudian title, 'The Movement and its Discontents', leads one to expect the kind of mainstream/modernist binary expounded by Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents 1950-2000* (Liverpool University Press, 2005). In fact, the modernists come later in Falci's book, whilst the 'discontents' of Chapter One are figures such as Stevie Smith and W. S. Graham, who 'neither correlated with Movement tendencies nor took an active stance against them' (p. 29). Falci positions these poets very much in the interstices between mainstream and modernist writing, showing Smith's 'Not Waving but Drowning' to be 'wrenched out of alignment in nearly every possible way' (p. 32).

Chapter Two is titled 'Decolonizing Poetry', and begins by identifying a generation of poets who directly experienced British colonisation and decolonisation – with Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite as the central figures. Falci suggests that this strand of the narrative 'is key to an account of British poetry [...] but it isn't centred in the British Isles' (pp. 44–45). Falci's attentive readings, particularly of Walcott, hone in on multiplicity and hybridity – because the objects of the poetry are depicted in those terms, but also because the poets are amphibian in their relationship to traditional verse technique. The chapter calls attention to the historical blind-spot by which British publishers have ignored West Indian poetry; but, more positively, it celebrates initiatives like the Caribbean Artists Movement. Falci turns briefly to African Anglophone poetry, registering its underexplored contributions to modernism, on which there is evidently much more to say. He ends, rather unexpectedly, with a reading of Ted Hughes's early work, 'in which all the substance of civilization and culture is stripped away to reveal the primal, base forces' (p.66). Falci thus links Hughes to the 'elemental modernism' of African poetry (p. 65); but he also stresses how the "'deepening" of England', in poems such as 'Pike', is an uneasy reaction England's depleting status. This discussion of Hughes puts into practice the refusal to separate twentieth-century poets of the colonies from the central narrative of British verse.

Chapter Three – 'Local Modernism' – begins with a sketch of devolution, and the dual collapse of Englishness: both its colonial 'universality' and its internal coherence. Simultaneously, Falci suggests, processes of modernisation were cutting across British ideas of the regional and the local. His focus is on modernism and the scope of the long poem for thinking through ideas of place. The analysis of Roy Fisher's *City* is astute, and condenses some of the text's more complex features into quotable taglines: '*City* renders place as an always-problematic juxtaposition of discrete but interacting parts and environments' (p. 74); 'The "I" of his poetry resembles a surveyor more than an excavator' (p. 72). Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, on the other hand, risks being swallowed up by romantic recitation of the author's life ('a diplomat, a foreign correspondent for the *Times*, and, so the story goes, a British spy'; p. 75) along with overused structural analogies (how exactly does the poem resemble the *Lindisfarne Gospels*?). Thankfully, Falci's capable close readings return us to specific passages of the text, showing how its structure and texture co-inform one another. The poem is clearly interested in the relationship between past and present, as much as between self and environment. This harmonises with Geoffrey Hill, the next poet under discussion. Hill's early work already received reasonable notice in Chapter One; but in this reprise, Falci shows the multiplicity of voice and place in *Mercian Hymns*, which insists on the importance of the past for the present, but denies a stable relationship between the two.

Though Falci underplays it, a key strength of this account is in registering the connection between innovation and retrospection which is so important to many British poets. Falci is right to stress the importance of the long poem or sequence, which 'affords a textual or interpretative openness that productively complicates the conservative nature of their backward glances' (p. 87). Celebrating this vein of British poetics leads Falci to bemoan the relative neglect of the modernist

writing of the 1960s and '70s, a period now being reclaimed as one of extraordinary energy. He notes that '[m]any of the innovative works of the British Poetry Revival were, we might say, site specific' (p. 87), and ends the chapter by analysing Peter Riley's early-1980s publications. This leads neatly into Chapter Four, 'Late Modernism', which is dedicated wholly to the Revival. Clearly, Falci is genuine in his celebration of this poetry: this chapter is notably the longest in the book, even without poets like Geraldine Monk, Edwin Morgan, Maggie O'Sullivan, Denise Riley, and Peter Riley, who all appear elsewhere. Falci begins with a three-page history of the modernist revival scene, stressing the variety of its activities and outputs. Interestingly, Charles Olson's concept of Projectivism is offered as a way of unifying the Revival poets under one foreign influence. As the chapter progresses, it is plainly evident that Falci is an adroit reader of this often demanding poetry. Productive attention is paid to the form, style and energy of Tom Raworth's poems, for example, while details of their material publication are considered as part of their meaning.

At the core of the chapter, there is a large (perhaps even disproportionate) segment on the poetry of the Cambridge School. In his analysis of J. H. Prynne, Falci risks making this abstruse poet *less* comprehensible; but a sustained reading of 'The Glacial Question, Unsolved' succeeds in illustrating Prynne's experiments with the poetic subject, treated as 'no longer a site of plenitude or knowledge [...] but rather a wavering and unstable effect of the structures of late capitalism' (pp. 106-07). A reading of 'Chromatin', meanwhile, begins with close attention to sonic features, vocabulary and syntax. At this point, I would have liked rather more about John James, who has as much in common with Raworth as with Prynne. Later in the chapter, there is a welcome section on Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose numerous phases of artistic production are introduced. The chapter ends reiterating the importance of place in British poetry as a whole ('Poets have been obsessed with it' (p. 121)), and supplying a three-page reading of Allen Fisher's mammoth project, *PLACE*. Falci argues that a severing of British poetry into mainstream and innovative factions has obfuscated 'a patient consideration of the precise stakes of the projects that have been undertaken' (p. 125). Yet, unlike critical accounts that rather hollowly announce plurality and openness, Falci's book does not deny that a binary still operates in British poetry. He asserts, for example, that events constellating around experimental poetries of the 1970s 'underlie the continuing schism between so-called mainstream poetry and Revival poets and their heirs' (p. 93). Whether the schism encourages readers to do justice to the poetry itself, we may indeed wonder.

While apologising for its partitioning, Chapter Six isolates the poets of Northern Ireland. Falci is at home introducing this literature, and gives an abridged history of Ireland since the Anglo-Irish war. The downside is that it takes three pages to reach the poets and another three to reach a specific poem. While the previous chapter encountered radical challenges to lyric poetry, this one stresses the prevalence of lyric and the forms of innovation that happen within its confines. We start with Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, with analyses of the dislocations by which they 'write of the Troubles without writing about them' (p. 130). Heaney's 'interweavings' are the most prominent example (p. 134), and the sense of doubleness continues in the divided critical response to the 'bog poems'. Reception of these poems has shuttled to extremes, but Falci offers a balanced introduction. Moving forward, he places strong emphasis on the gap between Heaney's generation and that of Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, and Tom Paulin. Given the overall variety of British and Irish poetry, it is possible that the difference between these two groups is somewhat overstated. However, Falci does clearly and specifically delineate the kinds of complexity the later poets add to the dislocations of their forebears. The discussion of McGuckian is particularly good, describing how a cryptic and reticent poetic might paradoxically be publically engaged – with feminist discourse, as well as with the Troubles. Regarding Muldoon especially, Falci

continues to make connections between his chapters, pointing us back to poetries of place, but also forward to a resurgence of narrative.

The book's sixth chapter begins by sketching an increased plurality of voices in British poetry from the 1970s onwards. In the background here, we might locate the burgeoning of identity politics as a major focal point for British poetry – as continues to be seen in anthologies like *Identity Parade: New British & Irish Poets*, ed. by Roddy Lumsden (Bloodaxe, 2010). In the forefront, meanwhile, we are asked to connect a renewed turn to narrative forms and an emergence of new narratives about Britishness. Linton Kwesi Johnson's work is analysed in terms of a public voice, linked to the narration of specific, real events – in particular, racialized clashes with the police and other adversaries. Literature, orality and musicality are brought into dialogue here, while the line between canonicity and marginality is blurred. Falci then discusses Grace Nichols in relation to the decline of empire, the rise of postcolonial theory and shifts in British citizenship. We then encounter David Dabydeen's *Turner*, which is ekphrastic where Johnson was sonic. The breakdown of narrative progression in *Turner* is linked evocatively to a rupture of cultural memory by slavery and death. Jackie Kay's *Adoption Papers* offers a very different opportunity for thinking about racial and cultural identity in British poetry, with intriguing tensions between legal and poetic registers, as well as between personal and collective experience. The chapter becomes rather eclectic after this, as the initial focus on race morphs into one of class politics, then women's writing, and finally a survey of different ideas of 'home'. This leads us through Tony Harrison, Denise Riley, Douglas Dunn, Edwin Morgan, Fred D'Aguiar, Jo Shapcott and others in quick succession. Falci is very good at creating connections between these poets, and the result is a kaleidoscopic yet unified sense of the 1980s and '90s. The emergence of a mixture of narratives about identity is understood as a continued process of pluralising Britishness. This account verges on oversimplifying the diversity it espouses, yet is eminently serviceable as a snapshot introduction.

In the last of his central chapters – 'Platforms and Performances' – Falci straddles the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and is perhaps less successful at finding an emulsifier for an increasingly fluid canon. We begin by appraising recent shifts in the mechanisms of British poetry: a growing institutionalisation of poetry, through prize culture and through universities; a shrinking of poetry lists by the major publishers, but a flourishing of independent ventures; rapid technological developments that facilitate distribution; yet a greater embeddedness in a capitalist marketplace, and even (sometimes) in celebrity culture. There is a large section on the 'New Generation' poets, seven of whom were Scottish. This leads Falci to a broader sketch of some of recent poetic forces in Scotland, preceded by rather forgettable readings of Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy. We take a sharp turn into ecological and animalistic poetics, both traditional (Robert Minhinnick) and less so (Maggie O'Sullivan). The appearance of the former reminds us how few Welsh poets appear in this book – surely one of its shortcomings. In the latter instance, Falci does good work making sense of O'Sullivan's 'refusal of sense' (p. 196). He complements O'Sullivan with some material on Alan Halsey and Geraldine Monk, reflecting on the linguistic density and non-paraphrasability of these poets. Upon a brief recourse to Olson here, one might remark at how few foreign influences are mentioned – though we are told, for instance, that the Northern Irish poets 'have deep ties with British, American, and European poets' (p. 126). The overall insularity of the book is hardly a failing of Falci's – it is a convenient limitation of this type of study. One cannot help wondering what an introductory survey of British poetry would look like, were it to include the 'deep ties' to elsewhere substantially within its remit.

Falci's seventh chapter also raises the question of how much he has to say about poetry since 2000. Almost all the poetry of this final chapter was published before the turn of the

millennium, or is late-career work by older writers (Heaney, for instance). The chapter thus ends in a discussion of Hill's post-1996 publications, meaning that Hill appears substantially in three different chapters (a somewhat covert instatement of Hill as the major figure of the period). This is all well and good, but means that the reader is left waiting until 'Conclusion: Archipelagic Experiments' for a taste of contemporary developments. In this conclusion to the volume, Falci brings things more up to date whilst reflecting on the speculation involved. His solution is to identify five poets, included not as the central figures of the period, but rather as illustrative of two important trends: the way in which poets have (1) 'extended and compounded linguistic registers', and (2) 'stretched lyric form, absorbing disparate genres and mediums' (p. 208). As regards the first, Falci offers compelling readings of Daljit Nagra and Jen Hadfield, both of whom are thinking about the gaps and overlaps between languages, with little sense that there is a standard, singular language by which British poets must abide. Falci is again skilled in offering synergies and transitions, so the two poets complement each other but are also seen in the wake of earlier discussions. Falci continues to move adeptly from the mainstream (Nagra) to the experimental (Caroline Bergvall). He compellingly underlines continuities between the two, even whilst asserting that 'there remains a significant gap between so-called mainstream poetry and work that positions itself as alternative or experimental' (p. 209). The balance persists in connection with the second trend, where a discussion of the long poem or sequence moves happily between modernist and traditional examples, before settling on Alice Oswald's *Dart*. Proceedings begin to close with a summary of renewed debates surrounding Prynne and the Cambridge School. Falci considers how the disruption of lyric and narrative coherence may offer modes of public engagement and radical critique, rather than mere erudite party tricks. Keston Sutherland is adopted as the case study, leading to intriguing analyses of his poems as decentred political and economic critiques.

Falci ends his conclusion looking to post-Prynne experimentalism, stating that poetry must be a space of risk, mirroring the risks and crises of the contemporary world. While this sounds compelling and conclusive, the risk that 'is certainly run' by the Cambridge School seems anticlimactically to amount to the following: 'that it may inevitably remain within a small circle of the already converted' (p. 228). This is rather difficult to accept as a closing thought on modern British poetry. Perhaps more useful is Falci's sense that poems are 'cultural artifacts that comprise unique perspectives on the granularities of their moment' (p. 229). The history of British poetry – its forms and techniques, as well as its themes – is therefore 'a counterhistory' of Britain and of Britishness (p. 229), and one that seems to have an admirable amount of contradiction, hybridity and unreadability.

It remains to be said that this book – despite some shortcomings and imbalances – is indeed a worthwhile addition to well-stocked shelves. Falci offers a cohesive account of British poetry in the period 1945–2010, which he surveys quite widely, but also stakes a number of claims as to what is important. Moreover, Falci is a fine reader of poetry. Many of his analyses of both mainstream and experimental poems will serve as masterclasses for undergraduate students, as well as spurring academics to revisit and reread.

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