

Introduction

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In recent years a number of fine collections of critical essays on Anglo-American modern and contemporary poetry have appeared, among them David Murray's *Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon*, whose focus spans the century, and Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson's *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, which devotes approximately one third of its space to current British work.¹ Another very recent arrival is Manchester University Press's 1993 volume *New British poetries: The scope of the possible* (ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry), whose narrowed focus on several strands of formally innovative poetries provides the space for some substantial and, in some camps, long-awaited theoretical exploration (which I will return to in a moment). But not since Carcanet Press's *British Poetry since 1970: a critical survey* (ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, 1980)—an update on their earlier book edited by Grevel Lindop and Michael Schmidt, *British Poetry since 1960: a critical survey* (1972)—has a volume exclusively focusing on a wide range of contemporary British "poetries" appeared, and never has there been such a book produced by an American press or written by an international group of writers. My coeditor and I have attempted to demonstrate something of the variety of possible conversations to be encountered on recent British poetry; we have done so by following (if rather loosely and, at times, critically) in the footsteps of Carcanet's editors, offering our readers some updates on new developments in poetry since Jones and Schmidt's 1980 volume, as well as a number of rereadings of the contexts and writers that volume featured (or neglected to feature) from new perspectives in critical theory and contemporary philosophy. Everything about our volume bespeaks variousness and not definitiveness: readers will

find in its pages a number of differing critical and theoretical languages at work that articulate what we believe are accessible if at times clashing views of the poetry, the poets, and their “postmodern” historical moment.

What is made certain by our volume is that much has changed since Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt wrote their introduction to *British Poetry since 1970*—both in terms of the sensibilities of the poets emerging on the scene since then and the means by which that scene and its predecessors have become represented by critics, academics, and (as a consequence) publishers. For example, the well-respected poet/critic Blake Morrison could write, in the Carcanet volume (and with his tongue only partly in cheek), that a rough sketch of the young poet of the 1970s would picture him—“for ‘he’ is still more likely to be the case”—as emerging from the professional or middle classes (“or if it is working class we are less likely to hear about this than we would have been in the 60s”); he would have attended grammar school and then gone on to university (“probably Oxford or Cambridge”) and would “certainly have read English Literature.”

His politics are on the whole quietly 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 strict meter and rhyme.²

This nonpolemical writer nostalgic for premodernist paradigms for poetry is, of course, the kind of poet readers of British poetry will recognize as belonging to the “Movement”—represented, perhaps most famously, by Philip Larkin and Donald Davie—which emerged during the 1950s and took good enough hold of the poetry scene to weather the cultural revolution of the 1960s (with its proliferation of new, radically “popular” poetic forms corresponding to social and moral upheaval) and come out ostensibly on top again in the 1970s. The Movement’s judgment of the 1960s would no doubt be in sympathy with the retrospective judgment offered by the editors of the Carcanet volume that during that decade there were too many (and too “different”) kinds of poetries emerging at once and far too rapidly for critical sorting: “The 1960s were spoiled by excess of opportunities and choices and by paucity of generously stringent critics.”³

By contrast, recent anthologies of poetry like *the new british poetry* and

*The New Poetry*⁴—both of which allude by name to A. Alvarez's now legendary anti-Movement anthology, *The New Poetry*⁵—define and celebrate the current scene as being, like its supposedly emergent correlative in cultural politics, “pluralized” and undefinable, as the editors of *The New Poetry* make clear:

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 flourished.⁶

Not everyone is equally pleased about or convinced by the new poetic “democracy”⁷ and the plurality of its forms and voices, as reviews in central poetry journals like *PN Review* have made clear.⁸ But other long-standing poetry reviewers and theorists like Terry Eagleton remind us that the situation is at least increasingly one in which “the *marginal* becomes somehow central”⁹—a situation that has been fostered as much by the ascendancy of certain kinds of literary theory and criticism as by the compelling presence of growing numbers of women poets, black poets from a range of differing cultural communities, poets writing out of postcolonial experience or submerged traditions in Scotland and Wales, regional and working-class poets, and poets of all inflections writing in experimental, oppositional and/or “poststructuralist” forms.

It is in fact arguable—and several essays in our volume present this view—that there is no such thing as the much-discussed “new pluralism” but rather a newly seen or newly acknowledged pluralism. Theorists, critics, teachers, and, in turn, their readers and students are now being *trained* to train a critical eye on literary history's occlusions: the women poets crowding behind Blake Morrison's hypothetical “he” in the 1970s, some of whom are discussed in this book by Claire Buck; the black artists anthologized in liminal publications such as James Berry's *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of Westindian Poets in Britain* back in 1976,¹⁰ some of whom are discussed here by Alastair Niven; the triply marginalized female black poets *not* included in anthologies like Berry's but finally published in *A Dangerous Knowing* in 1985, and discussed here by C. L. Innes; the neomodernist or, as the authors

of *New British poetries* call them, the “Poetry Revival” poets who, as they claim, were edited out of British literary history until the 1980s¹¹ and who are discussed in our book by Edward Larrissy and John Matthias; such lists go on.

The crisis that the acknowledgment 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 judgment (and therefore power). Particularly in the first three examples above, “otherness” demands another kind of apprehension apart from the “standard”—one that the critic who is not from the social or cultural positioning at hand must learn yet remain always outside of, and one whose presence in the arena makes any final comparisons of “worth” between the different poetries difficult and even offensive. Postmodernism’s method of revising Yeats’s ominous line that “the center cannot hold” to read “the center *should* not hold” (meaning that it should be dismantled to reveal what it by definition marginalizes or suppresses) forces “judges” of poetry to look self-critically at their criteria for judgment and robs them of all tacitly granted authority. The continuing resistance to these poetries—demonstrated even by those anthologies that announce their circumspection—cannot easily be separated from resistance to the present era’s indeterminacies and destabilizations of order and power that have aided in enabling the emergence of “plurality” by calling the very idea and ideal of cultural unity into question.

Such challenges become much more complex when one considers, as many of our essayists do, strategies recently practiced by poets of all positionings that launch threats at an even deeper stronghold of the liberal humanist tradition: its conception of the free-standing, unified “self,” and that self’s power to act through rather than as an instrument of language. Ironically, the same theories that fostered critical interest in marginalized voices have thrown them and all others under suspicion; the impossibility of escaping formation by dominant structures of thought embedded in language itself causes “voice” to become the site for a new sort of struggle in poetry. At stake are revised understandings of subjectivity and its relation to the public sphere; the pervasiveness of such issues, both thematically and formally, in recent poems is such that Peter Middleton in his essay in *New British poetries* feels safe in drawing a dichotomy between “dominant

poetries and those where subjectivity is put into question.”¹² The new consciousness of the mediation of seemingly self-generated feelings and thoughts by ascendant forces in culture and history through language has of course had a profound effect particularly on the lyric—that supposed haven of the “private” self—but also on other forms, including narrative poetry and even elegy. One need only note the differences between the essays in *British Poetry since 1970* and the ones in this volume to realize that the writing of both poetic and critical work has as a result undergone a sea-change, though one produced, unlike Shakespeare’s, by processes of demystification from what have been perceived as various kinds of sorcery and illusion induced by the standard cultural narrative.

Middleton and the writers of *New British poetries* claim that the inevitable politicization of poetry that accompanies such recognitions about the self and language caused those Eric Mottram refers to as descendants of “the 1950s Axis orthodoxy”—or the Movement conglomerate “Conquest-Fraser-Larkin”—to actively exclude the poets that they understood to be harbingers of it.¹³ *New British poetries* specifically identifies those expressly excluded as being the poets of *A Various Art* and *the new british poetry* or those poets who, according to the book’s major argument, are described as having grown, like the language-centered poets of the United States, out of roots in an Anglo-American modernist tradition running back through Ashberyesque developments to Basil Bunting, David Jones, Hugh MacDiarmid, and (across the water) Charles Olson, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and (ultimately) Ezra Pound: poets including such diverse figures as Roy Fisher, J. H. Prynne, Allen Fisher, Elaine Feinstein, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Tom Pickard, Tom Raworth, and many more recently acclaimed poets mentioned in the book’s lists of perceived adherents and sympathizers. The “return to Pound” after his long literal and figurative exile could, one might argue, only be comfortably accomplished (or written about) in a context such as the present, in which the individual’s complicity in systemic cultural and intellectual violence is newly understood as the inevitable result of coming to being in language; thus it might be that in an interesting twist and reversal of literary history, Pound can be found by the authors of *New British poetries* to be in some ways no more politically reprehensible than his less forthcoming “Axis” accusers:

Pound's fascism provides an excuse for ignoring his poetry, perhaps precisely because his "disastrous career"¹⁴ raises unavoidably the question of the relations between poetry, history and politics, a question that Eliot's poetry or Larkin's occludes and mystifies. On the other hand, the tradition that Crozier mentions [in the introduction to *A Various Art*], which includes poets like Oppen, Zukofsky and Olson, repudiates Pound's fascism through an engagement with the issues of politics and poetics.¹⁵

Accepting that their hands are "always already" dirty in the Derridean sense—and that poetry is equally and inescapably permeated by not only politics and history but the history of *poetic* politics—the poets currently drawn to this particular strain of often highly theoretical poststructuralist art are able to recuperate Poundian political forays and "process" forms. Their reassertion of a vital link between contemporary British poetry and such modernist traditions has become the cornerstone joining an important new version of postmodernism's genealogy with the articulation of an increasingly disjunctive formal aesthetics—not too distantly related to that of the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets—involving poetry in the politics of discourse. In our volume, Edward Larrissy discusses more specifically the tensions present between an American and native British modernist influence on such poets, focusing his readings on three who appeared in *A Various Art*: J. H. Prynne, Andrew Crozier, and Veronica Forrest-Thomson. Theorizing that the British have practiced "only intermittently" the strain of "Romantic objectivism" that characterizes American projectivist art and other open forms, Larrissy brings the "knowing self-consciousness about discourse" he understands to undergird native neomodernism into seemingly unlikely dialogue with "organic" and process forms, locating a new hybrid at the intersection between modern Anglo-American trends.

The various readings, rereadings, and recontextualizations of poets writing at the juncture between modernist and postmodernist eras offered by Edward Larrissy, Antony Easthope, and John Matthias in this volume form interesting (if unplanned) complements for one another. Antony Easthope also calls up the "anti-Romantic" vision that has characterized British poetry (after a short tenure of neo-Romanticism in the 1940s) in order to trace the glimmer of postmodern perception that it made possible

in Donald Davie's early poems—those still wavering on the near side of the love/hate relationship with Ezra Pound's poetics demonstrated in Davie's critical work. With a "deliberately polemical intention," Easthope attributes "the failure of Englishness" to move, at that time, in the direction of such perceptions to "the undertow" of the dominant empirical tradition, which for decades held much of English poetry and philosophy back from engagement with ideas like those breaking on shore in mid-century France in the work of Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, Foucault, and others. Matthias, writing here about Roy Fisher (whom he included in his "neomodernist" anthology, *23 Modern British Poets*),¹⁶ raises questions similar to Easthope's concerning the empirical tradition and poetry, only in this case his concern is with the way in which that tradition has tended to read Fisher's work—usually perceiving him as a "realist," particularly after the publication of "City," his long poem in an urban setting. Returning to what Fisher might have meant when he said in a 1973 interview that in his work he portrays "the discontinuous self," Matthias suggests that an "equivocal 'I'" as opposed to an "empirical 'I'" is at work in the poems—or an "I" that becomes part of each construction it makes out of what it perceives in modernist, "vorticist" fashion. Between the lines of Fisher's work, as Matthias discusses it, readers are able to glimpse pivotal arguments about authorship and language that were occurring in the background at the time, revolutionizing literary theory and causing/reflecting new directions in poetry as well.

Rather than "transvalu[ing]" the works discussed in them—turning them into proofs for literary theory, as the editors of *British Poetry since 1970* feared critical writings might do to poems that surrender to such explication—the essays in this volume that are focused on the oeuvres of well-established poets like Fisher invoke new thought in order to reinvestigate poems for workings that could not be perceived from what our predecessors valued: "perspectives provided by precedent."¹⁷ For example, Nicholas Zurbrugg reconsiders the work of iconoclast Ian Hamilton Finlay—whose creations vanished into tradition's critical pigeonhole for concrete (meaning formally and therefore, the assumption goes, thematically radical) poetry—as evolving not only out of the experiments of modernism's avant-garde artists, and their "foreground[ed] signifier,"¹⁸ but also out of complex, not simply "radical," responses to one form of 1960s anti-Movement poetry, the "confessionalist"

poem. Zurbrugg likens Finlay's reconception of the poetic image to Roland Barthes's reconceptions of the sign in his phases of structuralist and poststructuralist thought, suggesting that Finlay engages self-consciously with the uncontrollable slippage of images through visual and textual history yet uses that knowledge to resist *both* the innocent use of language as self-expression *and* concrete poetry's becoming "a mere typographic game" or dalliance with what postmodern theorists have termed "simulacra"—overwritten images, figures, and forms that have lost the significance they may have once held in historical context. The fall of the hypostatic image from myth into textual history also becomes the focus of Paul Giles's essay on the equally long, interrelated careers of Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn. Giles discusses both poets' early immersion in the mid-century American modernist search for "architectonic syntheses" of the national experience within new/old mythic frameworks, and their gravitation away from mythic symbolism "into history," through ironic uses of what Paul de Man described as the allegorical trope to indicate not mythic but linguistic prior constructions of meaning. Giles's reading of the significance of particularly Gunn's subsequent use of formal meters opens the field for the arguments that R. K. Meiners, Linda Kinnahan, and I attempt to make concerning the importance of reconceived methods of formalist reading in a poststructuralist age.

Until recently in Britain, 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. Donald Davie put the equation most baldly in an early articulation of Movement aesthetics when he drew correlations "between the laws of syntax and the laws of society, between bodies of usage in speech and in social life, between tearing a word from its context and choosing a leader out of the ruck."¹⁹ Certainly much recent formal work does indeed demonstrate allegiance to the cultural order. However, given the gradual development of new sets of questions concerning the construction and imprisonment of subjectivity by linguistic and rhetorical structures, a new kind of "formality" can be discerned as having offered an effective (and indeed, some argue, the *only*) means of not only expressing a poet's awareness of the ineradicable influence of those structures but even of constructing, despite if necessarily *through* them, possible means of resistance. In Geoffrey

Hill's case, critics suggesting the presence of such an awareness in his work have remained opposed by those who would read his as an essentially conservative poetry, given its formality and obsession with the traditional themes of religion, war, and imperial history. In our volume, Meiners re-views both Hill's themes and forms as inherited elements of the poet's own construction in action, suggesting that his is a *formal* thematics: one in which the *contradictions* between the "site" for Hill's work—"in the shit" of linguistic history—and the oft-noted purity and chiseled beauty of his forms are what give rise to any available "meaning." In my own essay for the volume I attempt to contextualize similar strategies at work in the poems of Tony Harrison and Jon Silkin, both of whom were writing, like Hill, in Leeds at the beginning of the cultural/linguistic revolution, though theirs is poetry more overtly charged with working class and minority issues. By retrieving several fragments of the argument (which ranged from midcentury to the 1970s) over the changing nature of *littérature engagée* and its future in the postmodern arena, I attempt to draw relationships between developing poetic/formal and political philosophies and to understand their intersection as the generative matrix for a new form of "poetry of the committed individual."

Clearly any commitment to recovering the experience of the suppressed and unrepresented must become enormously vexed in the present theoretical climate; the art of "revolt" is for many less simple than it might have seemed in the 1960s. Certainly increasing numbers of women writers have found it difficult to continue what Claire Buck describes as the "Radical Feminist search for an authentic female nature" such as it might have been before patriarchal/discursive manipulation of it, though the idea is obviously an attractive one given that it binds women together in relation by identity, as a political force. Reconstructing the debate between early essentializing forces in feminist poetry and those writing from "marginalized" positions within it—Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley, for example, and those whose various poststructuralist awarenesses precluded participation in quite the same goals—Buck begins to rectify the "general failure to examine the place of the body of this work" in postwar cultural studies. Keeping an eye on the differing dynamics operant in American feminist poetry, she also discusses some reasons for "the difficulty about establishing a significant role for poetry [in Britain] as a mode of feminist cultural politics."

Taking up opposing problems raised, more recently, by the emergence of what some refer to as “postfeminism” in British women’s poetry, Vicki Bertram engages frankly with what she understands to be its covert conservative politics of “judgment” leading women directly back into the textual confines of the liberal humanist tradition instead of toward its goal somewhere beyond gender politics. In her problematization of “the search for evaluative criteria” conducted by poets like Fleur Adcock and Carol Rumens, who have both edited influential new anthologies of women’s poetry, Bertram deconstructs the reemergence of words like *universal* in discussions of feminine aesthetics as well as the resurrection of disparaging representations of the earlier feminist poets discussed by Buck, suggesting that such “new” developments leave us “no nearer having a satisfactory context within and against which poetry by women can be read and enjoyed than we were in the 1950s.” The perpetuation of midcentury divisions between politics and poetry in British women’s writing (made evident, ironically, by its politics of anthologization and exclusion as exposed by Buck and Bertram) has contributed to the isolation into which such work has been cast, particularly by American readers and critics, whose frequent misconception is that “there is nothing interesting or experimental happening in British women’s poetry.”

With the help of a transported context from the United States, Linda Kinnahan revises some of these misconceptions in a reading of the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy, which she sees as being no less (only differently) innovative and oppositional in its British context than the disruptive forms that have tended to be developed by North American women poets emerging out of organic traditions into the postmodern landscape of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Reconsidering Duffy’s “more accessible form” as “mark[ing],” perhaps even more significantly than the disturbing displacements in signification of her North American neighbors, “an . . . engagement with [rather than a departure from] social discourse,” Kinnahan locates formal strategies in Duffy’s work that redraw the writer’s individual and even gendered agency in the act of negotiating linguistically with her own selfhood as a construction “aware of its constructedness or its own grammar.” Such awareness renews rather than precludes “feminism” or “commitment” in poetry, and formal readings such as Kinnahan’s help to refute the charge of “nihilism so often leveled as criticism at poststructuralist interrogations of the humanist, autonomous self.”

Of course the process of interrogating selfhood becomes even more complex for the “multicultural” poet, whose models involve constructs from outside dominant western European traditions. The desire to give voice to those constructs, and to counter-colonize British poetry with one’s own “nation-language,” have for such poets understandably preceded any desire to “enact a process of self-deconstruction.” Instead, images from South Asian mythologies, as well as Caribbean and African rhythms of reggae and rap, calypso and blues, have, as they have in the United States, accompanied the sounding of “other” vital communities gathering force, like feminist contingents, alongside the dominant one. Aware of their liminality—or “rejection,” as Alastair Niven more strongly puts it—and intent upon collectivity rather than fragmentation in the face of it, many poets have chosen to develop their own native forms of “performance poetry” that, like little else heard in Britain for hundreds of years, speak of models of communal selfhood rather than bourgeois individualism. Others, as Niven discusses them, work over a wide, exploratory range, encountering an equally wide range of problems—ones not limited, of course, to newly incoming peoples. As Fred D’Aguiar writes in his contribution to the *New British poetries*, the first and very bloody riots that occurred in the 1980s arose from the frustration of a “generation of British-born and bred blacks [who] had come of age only to find that Britishness did not include them.”²⁰ Niven discusses the emergence of black writing “Out of the Margins,” as it was put in a recent, grand-scale celebration in London (hosted by the Arts Council, for which Niven serves as literature director); beginning with pioneering figures like James Berry and E. A. Markham, he brings readers up to date on some of the newest young writers, many of whom have not yet fought their way in from the “outside.”

As an influential artist and critic, D’Aguiar also stirs up controversy when he writes that he is “not sure how much mileage is to be had out of seeing [the] wellspring of black women’s writing as so different from what black men are writing that it merits separate treatment.”²¹ Others like Susheila Nasta have lamented the fact that the latter tends to subsume the former and that in Britain, unlike in the States, no body of criticism has been developing alongside the gathering number of black women’s texts.²² In our volume, C. L. Innes discusses a number of good reasons for the “separate treatment” of multicultural women poets who, as she makes clear, are

particularly sensitive to issues of difference—both those tentatively dismissed by D'Aguiar in the above quotation and those overlooked or downplayed in the interest of feminist solidarity. Standing at the vanishing point of any new representation of either their culture (dominated by the black male's image) or their sex (dominated by the white western female's image), multicultural women poets importantly illustrate in their work the impossibility of, and potential dangers inherent in, essentializations about selfhood or womanhood.

Also included in the contemporary project of asserting and exploring cultural differences—as well as the effects sustained by the subject *made* subject to another culture's domination—are the poets of Scotland and Wales, where retrievals of native language and tradition long subsumed by English culture and its centrifugal forces often prompt comparison with those of postcolonial nations. In Scotland, as Cairns Craig writes, the “obliterating effects” of post–World War II consensus politics have slowly given way, enabling poets to experience the 1980s as “a decade of deepening and intensifying awareness of the difference of Scottish culture from English.” Some of those differences, recovered not only from modernism's strong nationalist drive in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid and others but also from much older political and religious traditions, encourage, as in postcolonial poetry, a revaluation of community identity and “rejection of the individualist ethics of Thatcherism.” Such recastings of identity are never seamless, as Linden Peach suggests by examining changes in constructions of Welshness given their partial dislocation from traditional roots in the landscape and regional mythology and their relocation among less-stable realms for identification. Reading in Welsh poetry a coming to terms with post-modern, industrialized Wales, with its “electronic spaces,” gender fault lines, and truncated cultural memory, Peach describes a process within it that he identifies, borrowing a term from theorist Edward Soja, as “reterritorialization”—the reclamation of a sociospatial understanding of self through rereadings of the ways in which power relations have all along been inscribed in “the apparent innocent spatiality of social life.”

The recognition on the part of these poets, and indeed so many of the poets discussed in this volume, of the situatedness of selfhood—perceived, paradoxically, alongside the recognition that “[i]ncreasingly, modern identities are being shaped by a process that is both multilayered and inter-

national”—makes the return to a “poetry of place” seem particularly necessary now, if for a new set of reasons. Recovering some sense of the ways in which places map out *selves* rather than vice versa and of the ways in which constructed spaces perpetuate, through learned means of perceiving them in language, the influence of long unwritten histories of power relations, dominations, occlusions, and subtle persuasions allows the postmodern poet a new terrain within which to operate—one so critically fashioned by metonymic language and spatial metaphors that poetry’s figurative medium becomes, arguably, one of the best for exploring its design. Counteracting the depthless, decorative, “fetishized” use of history in some strains of postmodern art, such poetry attempts to recompose itself in dialogue with the past—resurveying, in the case of Scotland and Wales, constructs of national identity made particular by the cultural web that draws “lines,” signs, and boundaries all about where they are.

To summarize where British poetry in generalized terms seems to stand, at this or at any given moment in contemporary history is, as the above outline of this book’s various topics and arguments is intended to make clear, an impossible and misguided task. Even as I make the sort of mildly descriptive/prescriptive, generalized statement that I do above concerning revised notions of a “poetry of place,” at my back I hear the objections of poets like Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard who, in the afterword to their anthology *Floating Capital: New Poets from London* write that the “deadening . . . obsession with ‘place’ has been superseded by a willingness to deal with the materials that are readily to hand or impose themselves in the act of writing”²³—or by a poetry in which attention has “shifted from referent to signifier” in ways equally conversant with recent theory but with somewhat different goals. Again, as I suggested at the outset of this introduction, such poetries have been as marginalized in recent literary history in Britain as many other-cultural and other-national poetries; therefore I feel compelled to say with care that although a number of key issues have demanded response across the spectrum of contemporary poems, given the challenges presented by postmodern philosophy to conventions like the lyric voice and traditional narrative—even the seemingly simple use of the sign itself—it is no longer possible to characterize developments decade by decade as has been customary in criticism about British poetry. That kind of construction is now

perceived as being far too simple and exclusionary to accommodate the diversity of the scene since midcentury, if it ever indeed accommodated any decade without distortion. Perhaps I can only venture to say that the current poetry scene in Britain demands renewed attention from readers and critics alike because, on its relatively small but widely varied, internationalized stage, it is richly enacting the breakdown of older orders and newly responding to the sorts of postcolonial and postpatriarchal as well as “postmodern” instillations that have in differing vocabularies spelled the fates of many other cultural/political structures in our *fin-de-siècle* world. The stir has had efflorescent results in poetry; we hope that our collection conveys some of that excitement, and that both the limitations and the strengths of our volume will work in tandem to inspire others to join in the ensuing conversation about contemporary British poetry.

Notes

1. David Murray, *Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon* (London: Batsford, 1989); Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson, eds., *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991). Objection may well be made to my use of the word *British* here, given that the book being described includes work on Seamus Heaney, who *has* objected to being subsumed under its cultural heading. Our book does not include work on Irish or Northern Irish poets, simply for reasons of space; still, we apologize to readers who take issue with our title, given that we include essays on Scottish, Welsh, and “multicultural” poets writing from hyphenated positions within those national boundaries.

2. Blake Morrison, in *British Poetry since 1970: a critical survey*, ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester, England: Carcanet Press, 1980), 142.

3. Jones and Schmidt, *British Poetry since 1970*, ix.

4. Gillian Allnutt, Fred D’Aguiar, Ken Edwards, and Eric Mottram, eds., *the new british poetry* (London: Paladin, 1988); Michael Hulse, David Kennedy, and David Morley, eds., *The New Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993).

5. A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1962).

6. Hulse, Kennedy, and Morley, *The New Poetry*, 15.

7. *Ibid.*, 16.

8. See, for one example, Neil Powell’s review in *PN Review* 19, no. 6 (July–August 1993): 58–59; see also “The New Poetry: A Symposium,” in *Poetry Review* 83, no. 2 (summer 1993): 4–33.

9. Terry Eagleton, "Comment," *Poetry Review* 79, no. 4 (winter 1989-90): 46 (emphasis added).
10. James Berry, ed., *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of Westindian Poets in Britain* (London: Limestone, 1976).
11. These poets were, however, anthologized by John Matthias in the United States in *23 Modern British Poets* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971).
12. 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. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1993), 119.
13. Hampson and Barry, *New British poetries*, 32, 23.
14. This phrase is quoted from Donald Davie's *Pound: The Poet as Sculptor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 244.
15. Hampson and Barry, *New British poetries*, 7.
16. Matthias, *23 Modern British Poets*. See note 11 above.
17. Jones and Schmidt, *British Poetry since 1970*, xxi.
18. Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard, eds., *Floating Capital: New Poets from London* (Elmwood, Conn.: Poets and Poets Press, 1991), 122.
19. Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), 99.
20. Fred D'Aguiar, "Have you been here long? Black poetry in Britain," in Hampson and Barry, *New British poetries*, 59.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
22. "Publishing" (debate), "Out of the Margins: African, South Asian and Caribbean Writers in Britain," Arts Council/South Bank Centre, London 1993. Nasta is the founding editor of *Wasafiri*, a well-known journal devoted to black writing.
23. Clarke and Sheppard, *Floating Capital*, 122.