

## POETIC MODERNISM AND THE OCEANIC DIVIDE

NEW BRITISH POETRY. Edited by Don Paterson and Charles Simic. St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004. xxxv, 194 pp. \$16.00, paper.

Re-igniting old arguments about the difference between British and American verse, *New British Poetry* is simultaneously helpful and unsatisfactory. Edited by British poet Don Paterson and renowned American poet Charles Simic, the anthology provides only a partial view of the current state of poetry in the U.K. The book has quickly catalyzed debate. Upon its publication, Michael Hoffman and William Logan argued in a recent *Poetry Magazine* that poems on *both* sides of the Atlantic are just plain bad, while Sandra Gilbert separately claimed that old ideas about our differences are built on “shaky stereotypes.” Like cartoons masquerading as reality, the stereotypes are obvious: Contemporary British poets remain rhyming automatons and Americans are still bellowing their free verse yawps. I wholeheartedly endorse Gilbert’s desire both to see similarities and to breakdown outdated notions. And yet, as represented here by brief samples of their work, better than half of the thirty-six poets in the anthology are in fact formalists; no representative anthology of new American poets would have more than a small percentage of formalists. Perhaps I’m helplessly American in my tastes, but I must confess that I’m drawn broadly to the comparatively few poets in the anthology who seem to feature adept imagination over metrical language, who prefer art that knows how to surprise over art that knows how to operate within a fixed scheme.

Other than his insistence that Paterson be included, I don't know how much Simic had to do with the selections here. Given many of his introductory remarks, it's clear that Paterson's narrow vision has resulted in an anthology that is not a representative cross-section of "new" British poetry. The fact is, contemporary American poets know very little about their British counterparts and this anthology will only enlighten them a little bit. Now that Larkin and Hughes are dead, most of us may have assumed that British poets have returned to laboring in neat little fields circumscribed by fourteen rhyming lines and one-hundred-and-forty syllables. Of course, as Gilbert suggests, we're wrong—but, given the provinciality of *New British Poetry*, I can't be sure by how much. There is considerable difference when we contrast the bulk of British and American poetry over the last two centuries. Every year, I compare the modern literatures of both countries while teaching an undergraduate "core" course. Sometimes I rely on foundational texts by D.H. Lawrence, F.O. Matthiessen, Leo Marx, and R.W.B. Lewis, though I've also been interested in more recent critics such as Richard Chase, William A. Johnsen, Anna Massa, and Alistair Stead. In general critics have claimed that British verse was long ago marked by its staid traditions of form and voice and that American verse has been characterized by its compulsions toward a roughhewn originality. I usually agree with those who think that British writers have been molded in good part by considerations of class and American writers by ideals that favor the Emersonian individual. Today's British population is undergoing an influx of non-Anglo groups, and this influx is helping to expand the culture. While we don't have time to examine the implications here, it's clear that a continuous introduction of new values about literature and other concerns eventually will assert change upon any society.

Preceding such change, presumptions about national geography probably played a role in shaping not only each nation's perception of itself but also its view across the oceanic divide. There are those who feel that in the English imagination the British Isle has been a long-domesticated bucolic respite and that in the American imagination the feral wilderness of our westward expansion has been the key archetype. It's theorized that these presumptions influenced the two national self-concepts very differently and, therefore, resulted in the characteristic strengths of each country's writers. In poetry, the Brits could sing like no one, and the Yanks were born to pioneer new forms. If the alleged national characteristics fired literary strengths, however, the strengths surely betrayed weaknesses as well. I tend to agree with those who believe that, in the hands of some British writers, formalism dulled the imagination. The critics may also have a point when they say some American poets were thought to be ready image-makers dumbled down by tin ears—at least most of those poets attempting to convert a unisonous, conversational American expression into verse. But do these trends still adhere?

In order to foreground the issues that the anthology gives rise to, allow me to provide a few examples from the book. Here's the first stanza from "Cousin Coat" by Sean O'Brien:

You are my secret coat. You're never dry.  
 You wear the weight and stink of black canals.  
 Malodorous companion, we know why  
 It's taken me so long to see we're pals,  
 To learn why my acquaintance never sniff

Or send me notes to say I stink of stiff.

And here's the opening stanza to "Mythology" by Andrew Motion:

Earth's axle creaks; the year jolts on; the trees  
 Begin to slip their brittle leaves, their flakes of rust;  
 And darkness takes the edge off daylight, not  
 Because it wants to—never that. Because it must.

I find both of these examples too predictable in expression. While there are some interesting turns of phrase ("the weight and stink of black canals"; "darkness takes the edge off daylight"), the gears of language labor in clop-clop pacing to fit the hard end-rhymes. Both would benefit from the leavening of half or quarter rhymes. On first reading, readers could surely recite the last three words of Motion's stanza—*before* having read them. Fortunately, both O'Brien ("the UK's leading poet-critic," according to the editors) and Motion (the UK's official "Poet Laureate") have stronger poems in the volume.

The opening of Lavinia Greenlaw's poem "The Spirit of the Staircase" is about a childhood memory of sledding down a stairwell on "pillows or trays":

In our game of flight, half-way down  
 was as near mid-air as it got: a point  
 of no return we'd flung ourselves at

over and over, riding pillows or trays.

We were quick to smooth the edge

of each step, grinding the carpet

to glass on which we'd lose our grip.

The passage is not flexed into a rhyming, metrical vice. To my ear, it owns a persuasive velocity that matches the events. Greenlaw's language is enhanced by a series of internal echoes ("flight" / "got," "got" / "at," "step" / "grip"). The poem's resulting celerity works against the surprise turn in the last third in which close siblings are existentially alone, i.e., human.

My next choice betrays the intentionally over-reductive statement above in which I flatly privileged imagination over form. I wish I had room to quote Alan Jenkins' poem "Barcelona" in its entirety, for not only do I find it the best poem in the book, but it exemplifies key strengths of both British and American writers. It is an idiosyncratically haunting, highly imaginative elegy; it employs a quick lyric cadence without severe metrical enclosure; and it makes use of strong but irregular rhyme. Here are the first seven lines of the fifty-three-line poem:

What was I doing here, haunting the dead?

From his studio in a derelict cigarette factory

The windowless windows of the derelict warehouse opposite

Were blind eyes overlooking the ochres and umbers

Of his palette—I saw his corduroys and scarf,

His slicked-back hair, his head thrown back to laugh

A nineteenth-century, *La Boheme* laugh. But he was gone...

By infusing these burnt-out images with repetitions (“derelict” twice; windowless windows”) and internal half rhymes with French derivatives (“dead” / “cigarette” / palette”; “ochers and umbers”), Jenkins demonstrates an extraordinary facility for rendering a troubled interior growing increasingly paranoid.

“Barcelona” is adept at raising the dark, unflattering aspects of the unconscious to the surface. A third of the way into the poem, the dead man’s widow defers the narrator’s advances and guides him into the streets, where alone he tours a nightmarish Barcelona, haunted by a mysterious absent lover (“...I’d breathed in every tapas bar / the now-familiar amalgam that you are—”). In Spain, as elsewhere, commerce depraves. All the stimuli of the street recalls other, better times, but the romance of the past is soon skewed by association into ugliness: “But what was this drift or shift like condom-littered sands / along the shore?” Finally, on a wave of rhyme, strong stresses, and compound terms, he wends his way into a sex club where he ends a hapless search for meaning in art and/or desire:

...tugging at myself, so raw and dry,  
 I wanted to believe in art that doesn’t die,  
 in whatever lives on in a gothic-baroque-cubist heaven  
 with sea-nymphs riding dolphins, sea-creatures, shells  
 with clouds and putti, far from these semen smells,

blade-and-needle-sharpened, blind-eyed streets.

Jenkins' poem is an excellent example of the late modernism fathered by Williams and practiced by Ginsberg, the middle and later Lowell, Plath, et al. Unlike the archetypal monuments of high modernism, such as "Mauberly," "Prufrock," "The Waste Land," "Sunday Morning," and *The Cantos*, Jenkins poem doesn't rely on typographical tools or absent transitions to render either the disjunctive quality of consciousness or the difficulty in ascertaining meaning. I would have enjoyed seeing more poems like this in the anthology and fewer of the traditional "well-made" poems. I would have likewise preferred work by poets for whom modernism of any kind sustains the same strong ongoing influence that it does in the U.S.

While Simic wrote the book's preface, Paterson is apparently the primary editor. And though he denies it, Paterson seems to want a manifesto war with Keith Tuma, who edited the massive *Anthology of Twentieth Century British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford, 2001). In the past Tuma has critiqued the British literary establishment's dismissal of modernism, and in his own introduction he admits to highlighting contemporary practitioners of more experimental work. Though I'm not here to review the Oxford anthology, I certainly prefer Tuma's modernist impulses if not all of his choices, some of whom seem dulled either by the strain of their experiments or the over-privileging of a political viewpoint. Several are brilliant, including John Wilkinson, Tony Lopez, and Moniza Alvi. (If we were including Irish poets, I'd quickly add others.) Each anthologist could have borrowed happily from the other's aesthetic. Paterson includes thirty-six poets in *New British Poetry* born after 1945, and Tuma includes twenty-nine British Poets; only

four are included in both—Jo Shapcott, Carol Ann Duffy, Jackie Kay, and W.N. Herbert. Of these, Shapcott inverts formal expectations to serve witty ideas about love, Kay sharply depicts the psyche of those invested with social and legal power, and Herbert writes a little of everything, including narrative poems in Scots. But Duffy strikes me as the most significant of the four, primarily because she continues to find charged ways to represent a feminist consciousness willing to reexamine itself while ultimately reaffirming itself. Her work is complex, psychological, and effectively political; as such, she stands out in *New British Poetry*.

Paterson argues that too many Americans forsake sound and craft. Tuma argues that too many British critics and anthologists have dismissed non-traditional verse, despite numerous British poets still breaking open conventional grammar. Like Simic, Logan and Hoffman, Paterson is unhappy that American poetry is presently “freewheeling, loose-lined, and open-ended,” while he clearly prefers the poetry of the UK because it “demonstrate[s] an allegiance to more traditional ideas of form and poetic closure.” Weirdly, Paterson then goes off on a disproportionately long and sour anti-*postmodernist* rant.

But he never makes it clear what he means by “postmodern.” Perhaps Paterson means “difficult” or “experimental,” but today, at least in the U.S., “postmodern poetry” has come to mean L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. In England as here language poets represent a small minority of practicing poets. If I could be sure of his target, I might agree with Paterson: Spread wafer-thin on a frame of post-structural ideas that deny the efficacy of the author or even the existence of the human, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets cannot accommodate complex realms of feeling I prefer. I choose to adhere to the idea of



language as referent, though I don't necessarily dispute the post-structural ideas on which L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is based. But this is all a straw man argument. Tuma, for one, is not arguing for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, nor are the poets in his anthology practicing it. Averse to difficulty itself, lumping modernist and postmodernist poets together, Paterson demonstrates little room even for the kinds of *modernist* explorations practiced by fellow countrymen such as John Wilkinson and Robert Sheppard. In a righteously ironic huff, Paterson asserts that the "Po-mos" are "the first literary movement to have conceived the masterstroke of eliminating the reader entirely." To give American readers an idea of the sort of poetry he's describing, similar writers might include Norman Dubie, Lyn Emmanuel, Alice Fulton, Bob Hicock, Dean Young, and Susan Mitchell. I might agree that for three decades some quarters of American poetry have suffered from too much allegiance to the verse rhythms and plainspoken style of James Wright, who was incomparably brilliant and extremely difficult to imitate. But there are many American poets who create a dynamic, challenging style of expression, a prosody that Paterson has no choice but to dislike, because these writers don't adhere "to more traditional ideas of form and closure."

Most of us would agree that innovation is no crime. Readers of contemporary poetry know, for example, that many Americans find fresh avenues of poetic sound. That's why it's so surprising that Charles Simic would join Paterson by making the following over-the-top statement in his preface: "The great British and Irish poets are voluptuaries of words, and North Americans rarely are." Rarely? Stevens, Eliot, and Crane jump immediately to the head of our voluptuarial class. Right now Charles Wright's verse is among the most lush of the last fifty years, on either side of the ocean;

Gertrude Schnackneberg has certainly added expressive and thematic gravitas to the new formalism; Sandra McPherson's contrapuntal sounds and cadences are the stuff of jazz. As smart a poet as he is, Simic's provocation is a bit disingenuous; the anthology is not introducing the *great* British and Irish poets (nor *any* Irish poets for that matter), but contemporary poets of the U.K. Moreover, he seems willing to ignore the fact that rhyme, metrics, assonance, and alliteration are not necessarily the *only* tools that enhance the sensual quality of poetry. A whole school of late modernist American poets, for instance, is wary of both the loaded conventions of referentiality and culturally (read *commercially*) constructed identities, though these edgy writers still hold out for meaning. Demonstrating street smarts and alluding to both popular culture and traditional humanities, poets such as William Olson, T.R. Hummer, Bob Hicok, the late Linda Hull, Denis Johnson, and James McManus, all practice what I sometimes call an "adrenalinic verse" that rejects the seeming hollowness of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets as well as the predominant elegiac voice of romantic and modernist poetries. More formal than the Beats and less formal than Plath, they seem to be influenced by rock 'n roll and some tenets of materialist philosophy. The point is, these poets, too, are true "voluptuaries of words."

As Tuma's selections show, there are superb British poets involved in efforts to expand the possibilities of language without forfeiting signification. (Wilkinson comes quickly to mind.) But one wouldn't know this from Paterson's introduction in which he equates old conventions with accessibility, popularity, and utility. As an anthologist, he's only chosen work by poets "who still sell books to a general—i.e., non—practicing and non-academic—readership." Paterson says his choices are "mainstream" poets "born

after 1945,...[who] have published at least two books by the end of 2002.” He aligns “mainstream” with poets for whom “poetry can and should matter.” Modernism apparently never appealed to the British because “it did not present itself as the revolutionary alternative it was for the US, with its concomitant assertion of cultural independence.” Paterson maintains that modernist “possibilities...were already maturely assimilated by the 1930’s...” In other words, the explosive revolution of high modernist verse virtually never mattered in England. And yet, as the whole of Tuma’s anthology demonstrates, that is clearly not the case.

Gilbert has a good point about some of the similarities between both nations’ poets. While Paterson’s Brits are clearly much more concerned with form, some arrange free verse in elaborate stanzas completely familiar to readers of contemporary American poetry. Mark Ford, for instance, entwines onto an intricate stanza-work his comic insights about the contemporary psyche. Glyn Maxwell’s “Helene and Heloise” is a long, urbane, colorful rumination in a complex pattern that recalls the expatriated Auden. Other poets alternate between formal poems and free verse; reminiscent of Kinnell, “The Tyre” by Simon Armitage is a brilliant free verse exploration of the way symbols lodge in our consciousness for good and ill. Some of the poets eschew formalism altogether. One of my favorite poems here is the five-part sequence “Parousia” in which John Burnside describes the natural world as a place that may or may not host a numinous other. A few of Paterson’s picks, such as Jenkins, are fine elegists. (I’m surprised Burnside and Jenkins are not among Tuma’s choices.) Robin Robertson’s “Fugue for Phantoms” is exceptionally moving.

Several writers in *New British Poetry* write about eros much as do Americans, especially American women. With wit, constraint, and eroticism, Ruth Padel renders the limits and favors of romantic love. The socio-political realm is also included here. Jackie Kay's "Even the Trees" considers the kind of contemporary middle-class consciousness that could accommodate slavery right now. Fred D'Aguiar's "The Cow Perseverance" focuses on the relationships between unfathomable hunger, poise, and resignation. Like American poets, our British counterparts seem at home with the first person singular. Some are as concerned with consciousness and conscience as we are. Like many of our poets, some of these Brits wish to reorder imagination so that they may apprehend the changing world. Still, too many seem trapped by the expectations of a critical heritage that is uncomfortable with the new.

It should come as no surprise that formalist poets such as William Logan and Michael Hoffman (both of whom teach together at the University of Florida) would align themselves with Paterson's notions. The famously unpleaseable Logan has a reputation for disliking virtually all of American poetry since early Lowell. His protestations to the contrary, modernist experiments of all stripes continue to energize English language verse. And in the gulf between the British rhymesters and some of Tuma's radical innovators is what I presume subscribers to the *Georgia Review* want: new formulations of language and structure that retain the sensations of *both* the head and the heart. But the old divisions are hard to bridge. On one side are writers who sometimes grow nearly incestuous with the past, constantly reacquainting themselves with received ideas; on the other are those who veer too far from ordinary human response or spill beyond the borders of meaningful understanding. Yes, some inheritors of modernist values

occasionally overreach, and their poems can turn into numbingly long excursions, often straying—as one of my friends has been known to say—one or two clicks past comprehension. But in Britain, between the strictures of a debilitating birthright prosody and the attenuations of Derridean prescriptions, exists a wide and diverse range of superb poets. Why can't a single, inclusive anthology introduce American readers to *them*?