

Hardy, Stephen Paul

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POETRY, CULTURE AND THE NATION STATE: (SOME) RECENT BRITISH PERSPECTIVES

Steve Hardy

The principal aim of this article is to contribute to a growing debate about the relationship between different and often opposed viewpoints regarding the degree of heterogeneity which is possible or desirable in a given culture. The problematic nature of this concern has been reflected in British poetry and critical reaction to it over the period of the last twenty five years in particular. I propose here to do no more than offer the juxtaposition of a limited number of critical perspectives on the situation of British poetry during the last ten years and appropriate ways of analysing and responding to it. It is only really in the last ten years that theoretical perspectives primarily derived from the British reaction to and adaptation of French grand theory have started to noticeably affect the academic discussion of contemporary poetry in Britain. Many would of course argue that such a development is in itself very un-British and to be resisted in the name of preserving a valuable tradition. Anthony Thwaite in the revised edition of his guide to recent British verse¹ does not choose to spend time on discussing the rights and wrongs of academic theoretical perspectives and their application to the analysis of poetry. He does, however, devote a short opening chapter to the present state of the art, noting that the 'pop', 'protest' and 'underground' aspects of poetry in the latter half of the sixties have faded into educational respectability and that their possible descendants in the eighties are either 'zanies of the television screen' who make 'no pretensions whatsoever about being "poets"' or exponents of protest who 'despise any notion of their being considered "poets"'.² Thwaite places his emphasis on continuity rather than change:

As I said in the preface to the earlier version, 'The poets who had emerged and developed during the preceding decades weren't swept away and drowned by the changes in the 1960s'. There is still continuity and diversity.³

¹ Thwaite, Anthony, *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1984*, Longman (London and New York), 1985.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

This diversity does not include, however, those individuals who do not qualify as poets in inverted commas. A contrast between the non-'poet' protesters of the eighties and those who do qualify for inclusion as poets can be seen through comparison of two extracts from the same chapter. Protest of the eighties is present in the 'rants' (so named by their authors rather than by Thwaite) of Cooper Clark, Kwesi Johnson and 'Attila the Stockbroker'. These are described as being

– ferociously anarchic doggerel, laced with obscenities and often needing a violently aggressive and amplified musical backing.⁴

and are acknowledged to 'sometimes' command very large audiences'. In contrast to these

There is still an audience, by no means negligible, which is prepared to listen to poetry as an activity normal and enjoyable as listening to music... the BBC... broadcasts a good deal of new poetry on the Radio 3 network...

One might note here, among other things, the contrast between plural and singular audiences, type of music and the normal nature of the officially sanctioned latter audience. The author's introductory chapter ends with an assurance of continuity (rhetorically underlined with the third and final 'still' of the paragraph) that connects British poetry with a solid English male culture which regards such activities as comfortably, as opposed to threateningly, marginal:

... whatever the economic exigencies of the moment, or the average Englishman's embarrassment or stupefaction at mention of the words 'poet', 'poem' or 'poetry', there is no doubt that it is still a vigorous and varied art in Britain, not a dying craft which would disappear entirely without injections of patronage or money.⁶

The note of defensive confidence here becomes a shade wartime-Churchillian, an endangered but 'vigorous' minority who nonetheless significantly represent a moral majority or at least the guardianship of their security.

In an article on the cultural politics of 1968, Kobena Mercer notes the inevitable ability of right-wing politicians to exploit the liberation of marginal minorities by depicting their version of a silent majority unrepresented by an out of touch national administration whose pluralising policies threaten a basic and unacceptable division in society, often synonymous with the nation.⁷ Thus Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' success in the sixties which foreshadowed the successful rise of the New Right in Britain and its domination of British political narratives in the eighties.

⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 1-2.

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷ Mercer, Kobena, '1968: Periodizing Postmodern Politics and Identity' pp. 424-438, in *Cultural Studies* (ed. Grossberg L., Nelson C. and Treichler P.), Routledge (New York, London), 1992.

It is not my intention here to suggest that Anthony Thwaite's characterisation of the situation of contemporary British verse is either consciously or inadvertently racist but only to suggest that there is the conjuring of an 'imagined community' which can call too easily be claimed to have a range of representation whose justification many would challenge.

Indeed, a different perspective on the past and future of British poetry is presented in Anthony Easthope's 'Poetry As Discourse',⁸ published two years prior to Thwaite's revised guide. In this study, a concentrated theoretical analysis of what for Easthope is a key aspect of poetic form in British verse, it is argued that British poetry has more or less had its day and is precisely little more than the artificially preserved has-been which Thwaite claims it is not. Easthope claims that from the time of the Renaissance the traditional form of British verse, the iambic pentameter, has been used as a form of social hegemony through its use as the starting point for the conception of an apparently unified individual voice which the reader takes for their own, thus becoming a successful subject of bourgeois discourse and state. However, since the time of the great Moderns, Eliot and Pound, Easthope claims, this tradition has been increasingly in decline.

Bourgeois poetic discourse now has no real audience. It is kept alive only in a tainted and complicit form. The state promotes it in secondary and higher education as part of the syllabus for public examinations and 'English' degrees. In Britain the state also subsidizes such poetry through the Arts Council... Meanwhile, people are much more interested in such genuinely contemporary media as cinema, television and popular song...⁹

This does not mean that Easthope predicts the demise of poetic discourse, only the omission of its bourgeois prefix and situation. In subsequent publications¹⁰ he stresses the need for a new paradigm for textual criticism which will focus on the specific characteristics of widely differing signifying practices rather than privileging beforehand certain types of discourse. This involves the demise not only of the hitherto honoured if increasingly rarefied location of poetry but also of 'the great split' between high and low culture. Easthope notes that a proposal to abolish this split has been offered by at least one writer, Jim Collins, in a 'provocative, hopeful but somewhat glib manner'.¹¹ Before commenting on this evaluation I would like to spend some time here considering Collins' approach since it raises some of the basic problems of legitimation in increasingly culturally heterogeneous societies.¹²

Collins' starting point is his claim that the concept of a unitary public

⁸ Easthope, Anthony, *Poetry As Discourse*, Methuen (London and New York), 1983.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁰ Easthope, Anthony, *Literary Into Cultural Studies*, Routledge (London and New York), 1991.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹² Collins, Jim, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Postmodernism*, Routledge (New York, London), 1989.

sphere in which cultural critics can produce culturally universal judgements is too historically specific a concept to have any permanent validity. Siding with Edward Said's notion of worldliness in texts he implicitly takes issue with Harold Bloom's battle of the titans approach which places poets a very clear first in the cultural hierarchy. Texts rather than poets struggle to make their presence felt and do so in a context of democratic free-market meritocracy rather than lonely, aristocratic rivalry:

struggles texts engage in to 'clear a space' for themselves within specific semiotic environments are the direct result of an all-pervasive anxiety of confluence that affects all cultural production.¹³

Like Easthope, Collins sees no intrinsic reason for endowing one kind of text with more cultural value than another and he is particularly unsympathetic to the oppositional view of culture, applicable to Leavis or the Frankfurt School as well as much postmodernist criticism, which sees the role of the cultural critic as a nostalgic sage capable of showing his age only the wrongness of its crassly vulgar ways and increasingly incapable of doing that due to the rarefied unintelligibility of his own discourse – to all, at any rate, but a chosen few.

Instead Collins offers a view of culture in which it is characterised by its competitive heterogeneity. Like Easthope he is sympathetic to an Althusserian notion of interpellation but one modified by Bakhtin's conception of heteroglossia; there is not one ultimate source of 'truth', the state, but many sources, far more than Bakhtin's original theory could have envisaged. Consequently, Collins envisages a cultural arena in which texts will call upon their audiences by producing complex texts of numerous 'voices' but stylistically 'privileging' some, or one.

An example of this is the successful British film of 1982 'Charlots of Fire'. Collins acknowledges the importance of the ideologies of nationalism and religion in the film but claims that this does not account for the success of the film in the United States. This, he claims, can only be explained by the stylistic privileges given to sport as an ultimate value which transcends those of nationalism and religion. The famous slow-motion running scenes are the key example of this tactic. Collins claims that such films provide alternative ideologies which

... undermine a unitary notion of 'dominant culture' more explicitly than do oppositional films. They do not oppose a 'dominant', but instead suggest a transcendent set of values which, in effect, denies the validity of the specific 'dominant' they construct, thereby rendering it a non-system rather than a corrupt system.¹⁴

The problem here might be with the concept of sport as an 'alternative' ideology. If one sees sport as the carefully controlled leisure time of potentially subversive social groups and as an activity in which they

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

reproduce their conformity to accepted values and modes of behaviour in the workplace, the film has hardly offered an alternative, just another form of escapism. Easthope's objection to Collins' approach is perhaps comparable in his claim that the argument only succeeds by ignoring the place of selected texts in 'the wider discursive ensemble'.¹⁵

Collins' approach is 'nevertheless' potentially both challenging and liberating to conceptions of the function of poetry in late twentieth century society. In an analysis of poems by Brecht and Tony Harrison, Helga Geyer-Ryan also employs Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia as a starting point for both stylistic analysis of late twentieth century poetry function and value.¹⁶

Like Easthope, Geyer-Ryan focuses on a specific form of poetic discourse in order to challenge its contemporary validity and, like Collins, she uses Bakhtin to challenge an essentially nostalgic view of culture and poetry.

The 'rhetoric of silence' which, Geyer-Ryan claims, has become a postwar commonplace, echoing Adorno's evocation of a horrified cultural silence after Auschwitz is in fact part of an older and broader tradition of modern European poetry.

It is, in a general sense, the linguistic expression of one kind of idiosyncratic subjectivity which presents itself as an autonomous and absolute entity.¹⁷

It is, in Bakhtin's sense of the word an essentially 'monological' agency which unifies the heterogeneity of language in use, a 'langue' behind the 'parole' of heterogeneous discourse. This has tended to result in a poetry of alienated subjectivity in which poets begin to sound remarkably similar to Collins' cultural critics. Their poetry

...nostalgically presupposes a state of richness in the past, and the ever-worsening states of privation in the course of the modern era are expressed, as far as poetics are concerned, in ever more radical hermetic techniques.¹⁸

Rejecting one implication of Bakhtin's theory, namely that his conception of 'romannost' can exist in the novel but not in poetry, she shows how the hitherto excluded discourse of social groups whose means of expression is oral is, and can only be, included in the writing of poets like Brecht and Harrison. The written word of such poetry does not attempt to enact the authenticity of speech but rather to describe it and make its meaning impossible to centralise and appropriate. (One might compare this wit with Slavoj Žižek's description of a former inmate of one of the concentration camps in his refusal to leave post-war totalitarian Poland because he wished to constantly re-visit the scene of what had happened, but not to re-enact it.)¹⁹

¹⁵ Easthope 1991, p. 103.

¹⁶ Geyer-Ryan, Helga, 'Heteroglossia in the poetry of Bertolt Brecht and Tony Harrison', pp. 193-221 in *The Taming of the Text: Explorations in Language, Literature and Culture* (ed. Willie van Peer), Routledge (London and New York), 1989.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁹ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology Verso*, (London and New York) 1989.

Such a view is in opposition, to some extent at least, to that presented by Geoffrey Ward in his appreciation of the poetry of the British poet, J. H. Prynne in an anthology co-edited by Easthope which seeks to illustrate the increasing interaction between theory and poetic practice. It would be difficult to find a more extreme example of radical hermeticism in contemporary British verse but at the same time, as Ward points out,

... Prynne's writing has always carried anxieties of a political order, and it tackles head-on the dispersal of orders of language into specialist 'disciplines', especially the scientific, supposedly inaccessible to what the cultural norms outside his poetry would define as the ordinary reader. As a result Prynne's work entails a massive act of restitution, or a new constitution, of all language as open to use.²⁰

Thus different traditions can, sometimes, achieve different ends in different ways. Prynne's poetry as described, accurately enough by my perceptions, as working considerably if not totally within the dark interiority of the Romantic lyrical tradition and most memorably exemplified in recent times by the work of Paul Celan, clearly falls foul of the criticisms usefully forwarded by Geyer-Ryan in proposing a more responsive less monologic form of poetics. In both cases, through a form of restitution and liberation is claimed to have been achieved.

Questions of exclusion and restoration also occupy the final pair of commentators on British poetry I wish to include here. This time the emphasis is much more directly placed on the relationship between poetry and the British, or more precisely, English nation state.

In his 'England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry' John Lucas presents an account of the progressive exclusion of urban and democratic voices from British culture as presented in the official voice of English poetry. In a narrative very much in the tradition of Raymond Williams eloquently humanistic leftism, Lucas illustrates and documents the apparent collusion of poets such as the later Pope, Wordsworth and Tennyson in this process of ultimately and disastrously exclusive exclusion. The obvious casualties, now overdue for restitution, include Shelley, Clare and Browning. Lucas concludes the laconically eloquent preface to his history of collusion and exclusion by contrasting Browning's heteroglossia with Arnold's vision of the good society and those voices included for audibility within it. The result by the end of the nineteenth century, he claims, is a version of pastoral which excludes virtually everyone.

The most openly reactionary poets clung to a pastoral vision of England. The rest, reactionaries and radicals alike, committed themselves to that vision of primitivism which emerged in the later years of the century as a regenerative alternative to the decadence of the society of the city. (The late nineteenth century city-state was to be feared rather than welcomed)... By the end of the nineteenth century most English people live in cities. To be English was not to be English.²¹

²⁰ Ward, Geoffrey, 'Nothing but Mortality: Prynne and Celan', pp. 139-152 in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (ed. Easthope, A. and Thompson J. O., Harvester-Wheatsheaf 1991).

²¹ Lucas, John, 'England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood' in *English Poetry 1688-1900*, The Hogart Press (London), 1990 p. 9.

The final perspective on current British poetry which I wish to include is one whose own subtitle makes up the best part of my own title to this article. In a series of essays which cover similar ground to the approach of Lucas and in comparable fashion, with a strong and often vehemently eloquent commitment to historical context, Tom Paulin, Northern Ireland poet and English university lecturer, looks at the relationship between the poet as tortured individual and the state as tortuously entangling minotaur.²² His examples range from Milton to Dickens to Whitman and include central European poets, Herbert, Holub and Rozewicz. A positive Hegelian interpretation of the state as expression of the people's will is opposed to a negative Nietzschean characterisation of a cold monster of repression in an introduction which worries at the lack of critical attention to historical context in much recent theory.

Paulin's concluding essays deal with four recent British poets, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Peter Reading. Interestingly, Larkin and Hughes are both represented as figures both drawn to and torn by the cold Protestant English state their poetry has often closely identified with, Hill with the worst aspects of its reactionary face (again, references to Enoch Powell and 1968). It is the poetry of Peter Reading, self-made 'unofficial laureate of a decaying nation' which comes in for the least qualified praise. Paulin notes Reading's 'dissent ...(with) ...a conservative base', subverting Anglican notions of tradition such as those of T. S. Eliot, as well as his casting doubt on the idea of literariness, focusing on his 1985 volume 'Ukelele Music' which attempts to include the writings of the cleaning lady, Viv (life) in its resolutely un-English, Cloughian hexameters. Paulin's sense of Reading as a poet deeply sceptical about the state and value of poetry and of Britain, yet deeply attached to and vulnerably protective of both perhaps help to explain his success.

It will be seen that even from this very limited survey of critical perceptions of recent British poetry there are a range of interpretations of its place in an increasingly diverse and congested cultural arena. The work of Tony Harrison, J. H. Prynne and Peter Reading, poets on whose work some of the critical interpretations discussed here choose to focus, indicates a sensitivity to the responsibilities of negotiating a more perceptibly marginal position for the practice of verse, one which is capable of using some of its more conservative aspects to radically critical effect. It may be that perceptions of this kind will provide a continuing justification not just for a variety of usefully innovative forms of critical practice but for the continued practice of verse itself.

²² Paulin, Tom, *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State*, Faber and Faber (London and Boston), 1992.

