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Introduction: Poetries of England 2000–2040

Contemporary poetry from Britain, that is verse composed and published in the last two decades, has inevitably not generated an extensive scholarly literature. Writing about verse now is a risky business and is likely to give too many hostages to fortune. There are serious and insightful studies, such as Fiona Toland's *New Directions: Writing post 1990. Texts, Contexts, Connections* (2010) and Nerys Williams's *Contemporary Poetry* (2011). Our own volume in the Wiley Blackwell Companion series, while containing several essays that cover 21st-century verse, does so in the context of work done in the previous forty years. Thus, much of the contemporary analytic and interpretative writing on contemporary verse is limited to the review pages and interviews with poets in poetry journals, available in the invaluable files of the National Poetry Library at London's South Bank Centre. This collection of essays is an attempt to add to the discussion of contemporary poetry, although it does so from a particular angle.

The title of this gathering of essays needs to be explained. The plural word "Poetries" is motivated by a sense that there is no one poetry of a country or a collective, and, indeed, there never has been. The essays that follow discuss poetry that employs traditional metrical and rhythmic patternings, and those that deviate radically from those. Some discuss free verse; others discuss fixed forms (traditional and non-traditional). Others consider verse that is best seen as akin to concrete poetry and land art. Some of the verse discussed is clearly meant for public performance; other texts are meant for private reading. Subject matters are similarly diverse: war, the surveillance state, ecology, working-class lives, Black experience, private reflection, and public anger.

"England," too, needs glossing. The use of the term by the guest editors, an Austrian and a Scot, is deliberate. It certainly does not subscribe to any nationalist agenda, as we hope will be apparent in the essays that follow. The use of the term

“English” is born out of the logic of current terminology. If there is a category of verse that designates Irish or Welsh or Scottish poetry, and this is the case and is widely accepted as such, then it must be possible to discuss English verse. The English do, after all, make up the vast majority of people in the British archipelago. But just as with the Irish, Welsh, or Scots, the term “English” is far from monolithic. Regional, ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic differences are apparent among those who can credibly be classed as English. One must also always allow for overlap. As they always have, writers often embrace dual affiliations: for instance, English and Caribbean, English and continental European, English and Scots. In this collection of essays, we have operated with a perhaps reductive but practical set of criteria. An English writer is one who by place of birth or residence, by choice of publisher, by choice of topic, by choice of locale, and by self-identification (or lack of any other self-identification) can clearly be classed, to some degree, as an English poet. In 1982, in their anthology *Contemporary British Poetry*, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion made the adjective “British” expansive and controversial. Our use of the word “English” is modest and, we hope, uncontentious. It certainly allows for other identifications and self-identifications. It is not exclusive or constricted.

The dates given in the title may give the reader pause. The opening one – 2000 – should be uncontroversial, although a calendar date does not necessarily mark a significant literary one. However, James Byrne and Claire Pollard in their anthology *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (2009) clearly see the new millennium as marking a noteworthy shift in poetry, and such a sense that a new century brings a new literature is widespread. Just as with the 20th century, one can and should discuss when the century begins in literary or cultural terms, so with regard to the present century debates will and should continue as to when it actually began. This observation brings us to the second date in the title: 2040. The choice of a *terminus ad quem* is, to a degree, an arbitrary one. By placing 2040 in the title, we wish to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that the tendencies and processes observed in the essays gathered here are not completed. We can, in truth, have no idea how poetry will develop over the next few decades. But we might be able to speculate based on what we can observe now. Hard scientists do this all the time. We invited authors to speculate in this way. Some have done so; others have perhaps wisely restrained themselves. But even so, we invite readers to think about what kind of future might emerge out of what is observed here. What topics will endure? What writers look like they are destined to be remembered in twenty years’ time? What technical configurations will survive or return?

The essays collected here certainly point to varied and sometimes surprising features of contemporary English poetry. In “Beyond ‘for ever England’: Contemporary British Women’s War Poetry and the First World War Canon,” Sofia Permiakova points to a revival of poetry about warfare and about England’s (and Britain’s) wars in the 21st century, but one written from different perspectives

(female, post-colonial) from that of the traditional war poetry of the previous century. In “‘He’d seen it in the words of Owen and Brooke’: The Influence of Great War Poetry on Post-Millennium Soldier Poets,” Felix Behler discusses a related tendency in early 21st-century verse, in the poetry written by soldiers on active service in the British Army in Iraq and Afghanistan, and how such poetry connects with earlier soldier poetry. Conflict, too, is the subject of Juha Virtanen’s essay “love: necessity: anti-fa”: Hostile Environments and Necropolitics in Nat Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and Jay Bernard’s *Surge*,” in which he discusses politically engaged poetry on state sponsored exclusion, surveillance, and violence in the early years of the present century. Legacies of previous political and economic conflicts are addressed in Matthias Fechner’s “The Unaccompanied: Poetic Expressions of the Working Classes in England,” which considers poetic responses to the erosion and some might say the deletion of the traditional English working class in the late 20th and early 21st century. Different political concerns, that is ecological issues, loom large in Tymon Adamczewski’s “(im)Material Geographies: From Poetics of Terraforming to Earth Scripts,” which looks at contemporary poetic responses to the current ecological crisis facing England, Britain, and the world.

Technical and formal developments in verse, in some cases clearly aimed at reader accessibility, are discussed in the above essays, especially in Virtanen’s and Adamczewski’s pieces, but these form the central focus of the three remaining essays. Jerzy Jarniewicz’s “Translation-Poems: Blurred Genres and Shifting Authorship in Contemporary English Verse” considers what is already and what he thinks will be an important category of poem in the 21st century, that is one that blurs the boundaries between translation and original creation. Peter Hühn’s “Forms of Sequentiality in Contemporary English Poetry: Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell” looks at the work of poets whose poems are discussed elsewhere in our collection, but which he approaches within a rigorous narratological framework. This is the kind of analysis that we, the editors of this collection, consider to be particularly valuable, and one that that we can only hope becomes more widespread in the new century. Technical features of 21st-century verse figure prominently in David Malcolm’s “Brand New Oldies: Recent English Narrative Verse,” which discusses a recent resurgence of longer narrative poems, a resurgence that, as with Jarniewicz’s translation poems, blurs borders and categories. The formal focus of these three essays, in conjunction with aspects of the more thematically focused pieces, marks out a direction which the editors believe will prove very valuable in future work in the field of poetry.

Despite their diversity of focus and topic, the essays echo each other. Crisis, new and angry voices, the prominence of Black women’s voices, a desire to reach new audiences (to democratize poetry, as one commentator puts it), and transgression and blurring of boundaries (thematic and technical) run through all of them. The reader is left to draw her or his conclusions about the shape of things to come. To what extent the thematic and technical configurations pointed to in the essays

are specific to English as opposed to wider British poetic interests is an issue that requires further critical reflection.

As always, after editing a collection of essays, the editors are aware of what more there is to say and do. Topics immediately suggest themselves as valuable research areas for 21st century verse. For example, there needs to be a thorough investigation of the institutions associated with poetry in the early 21st century. By institutions we understand, for example, the publishers of poetry, the publishing houses that still have poetry lists, both large presses and smaller ones. We mean, too, the journals and magazines, still often ephemeral, online and off-line, that concentrate on verse. The prize system, which is important for poetic careers, needs close scrutiny, as do the links between publishers and major prizes. The publishing opportunities for non-white poets in the new century should be addressed. Creative writing courses now play a vital part in developing young poets' careers. The impact of such courses on subject matter and technique is worth looking at. Equally worthy of attention are the institution of the Poet Laureate and the influence that organizations such as the Poetry Book Society and The Royal Society of Literature, to name just two, as well as libraries, most prominently the National Poetry Library and the British Library, exercise on the development of poetry. These should be thoroughly studied.

It is certainly worth documenting and analysing the role of poetry in other media than print. Electronic ways of delivering and producing poetry offer new possibilities. Google poetry, spam poetry, the use of the internet as a collage-building machine – are these or similar developments here to stay? They should certainly be documented and discussed. Developments in performance poetry and the integration of verse with music (dub poetry, for example), while not new, may show innovative tendencies. The use of poetry in theatrical performance has not vanished, but still offers poets new kinds of audience.

Other topics also suggest themselves. England is rich in dialects, and there is a long tradition of dialect poetry. Are dialect verse traditions – Black Country, North-east, Liverpool, Mancunian, Cumbrian, West Country – alive and vibrant? Has a metropolitan norm crushed them and marginalized them? Other questions can be asked. Have traditional fixed forms vanished from contemporary English verse? Does a kind of loosely iambic free verse dominate journals and publishers' lists? And what of religious poetry? Is it still alive or is it absent in what is usually seen as a secular time in a secular society? Readers will doubtless be able to ask other questions. If this collection prompts such reflections and research, it will have served one of its purposes.

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