

## INTRODUCTION

Since the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* started to publish special issues in November 1988, this is the first time that one of them is particularly devoted to contemporary British poetry. As a guest editor for this volume, I thought that this would be a timely opportunity to invite contributors to write under the title “(Re)Defining Contemporary British Poetry.” The fact that it is published during the first decade of the 21st century seemed to lend itself nicely to a reflection about the status quo of poetry in Britain today. In accomplishing the edition of this issue, I have intended to provide room for as many different voices and positions in the field as possible. In this sense, the reader will initially encounter several articles dealing with Innovative Poetry, as it is the case with those written by Scott Thurston and also by Judy Kendall, both of them from the University of Salford.

Scott Thurston's essay has been included in the first place since it works as an extensive and comprehensive introduction to what, according to him and Robert Sheppard, Innovative Poetry is and means today. By discussing the role of little magazines and anthologies in the development of Innovative Poetry, particularly by quoting Caddel and Quartermain's tenets along his work, Thurston does indeed offer us a re-definition of contemporary British poetry. He exposes the great relevance that Innovative Poetry has resulting from poets who understand their writing in a different way to the “official” one. The three poets he chose to illustrate his tenets are most appropriate. Robert Sheppard's productive versatility exemplifies clearly the dissenting tradition he has inherited from Blake. Together with Sheppard's cultivated and critical view, Scott Thurston's choice of Caroline Bergvall's multilingual and hence multi-cultural perspective is also enriching. By linking her work with personal and national identity, body and space, Thurston is also tackling some of the issues most widely discussed and written about in contemporary British writing in general. Andrea Brady does also present Bergvall's international view together with Sheppard's concern for previous literature. Both the critical authors and the poets explored by Thurston do evidence that there is already a tradition of Innovative Poetry in Britain today connected to a “historical tradition of dissent.”



Judy Kendall's essay does also belong to the trend of Innovative Poetry. As an academic, she exposes the most recent projects in experimental visual texts at the University of Salford, paying particular attention to what these innovative creative processes implied for her students and herself. As a poet, she acknowledges the need to explore her own writing. In doing so, she illustrates with her work certain challenges and difficulties that Experimental Formalism involves for the writer and also for the reader. Two of her poems, "Still life with quinces and lemons" and "what I learnt on my first long wall" are included at the end of her article. Acting as a scholar and literary critic by scrutinizing her methods of composition and the different influences in several of her poems, Kendall evidences that despite no recognized school of visual texts creation exists as yet in the UK, her writing is sowing the seeds for it be founded.

Our third contributor, Esther Sánchez-Pardo presents an article in which, by examining Denise Riley's work, she reflects upon how subjectivity can work in a dynamic tension with form. Riley's versatility as an academic and philosopher with feminist interests derive in a work in which lyric subjectivity explores questions of language and identity. She has also been labelled as an experimental poet, and Sánchez-Pardo analyses the movement of reflection in language in her work in relation to the subject, between subjectivity and exteriority in the context of Cambridge poetry. Central to the project of Riley is the necessity of developing a reading community that has some cohesion in terms of its apprehension of gender's centrality to modes of poetic practice, authority, and tradition, and of correcting a certain male focus within the broader reading community of experimental poetics.

Since there can be no poetry issue without poetry, we are including "Back in the New Routine," "Things Are Not What They Seem" and "To Conclude," three original poems by Jeffrey Wainwright, who very kindly sent them to us for the present volume. His work includes *Selected Poems* (1985), *The Red-Headed Pupil* (1994), *Out of the Air* (1999) and *Clarity or Death!* (2008), all of them published by Carcanet Press. Among translations of his work is his long poem "Thomas Müntzer" in *Anthologie Bilingue de la Poesie Anglaise* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2005). He has translated plays by Péguy, Claudel, Corneille and Bernard-Marie Koltès. In addition, his book on the purposes and styles of poetry, *Poetry the Basics*, was published by Routledge in April 2004. Two years later, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, was published by Manchester University Press in 2006. Until recently he was Professor of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. He lives in Manchester and, for parts of the year, in Italy. We are deeply and sincerely grateful to Jeffrey Wainwright for his generous creative contribution.

The fourth article approaches the work of two mainstream poets from an interesting and renewing perspective. By considering the act of eating as a metaphor and trope in narrative and poetic texts, Angelica Michelis aims at arguing that it imbues a sense of ambiguity into textual proceedings and their readings and, as an effect, creates an atmosphere of ambivalence where pleasure dissolves into anxiety and vice versa. Hence, she initially chooses several poems from Carol Ann Duffy's *Rapture* and explores in detail how they can be read in relation to the complex issue of consuming love. In doing so Michelis relates Torok and Abraham's notion of



incorporation as a double act of cannibalism —first savagely ingesting the outside which, when incorporated, devours what is conceived of as inside— to the notion of love in Duffy's *Rapture*. Michelis also studies Michael Symmons Robert's collection *Corpus* explaining that it is the idea of the body in flux, in pieces and under construction that dominates the poetic framework of this collection. This appealing and illuminating approach on the part of Angelica Michelis bears witness to the fact that poetry literary criticism is walking in new directions, in accordance with the production of mainstream poets wishing to give their work a certain halo of fresh air. By relating the daily act of eating with the literary art of poetic writing, the author is undeniably providing us with food for thought.

The widening scope of the concept of mainstream in British poetry today is also to be read between the lines of Katharine Burkitt's article. She discusses the work of Jackie Kay and Bernardine Evaristo, illustrating how both writers refuse to be labelled only as Black British poets, exposing and proposing other defining features which they considered more relevant for them than nation and race. In doing so, both poets claim that gender, sexuality and femininity are paramount in their identities. A regional determinism is crucial in the case of Jackie Kay as she defines herself as Scottish, thus exposing a tension between her Scottishness and the British label usually applied to her and her poetry. There is a similar debate in Evaristo's case. Katharine Burkitt's detailed analysis of the former's work shows the existence of the tension between Englishness and other identities. Interestingly enough, "Englishness, is constructed outside the national boundaries, the crossing of borders is coupled with the return to a history of Englishness and a recuperation of that history that allows room for interpretation." Therefore, both Kay and Evaristo are certainly "Breaking the Mould," not only by refusing to be categorized under a particular label, but also turning into mainstream gender, regional and sexual features considered as marginal not so long ago.

Ian Brinton's essay, "'Wisdom Joyned with Simplicity': Landscapes of Charles Tomlinson," combines a thoroughly scholarly documented approach with a certain poetic style. This is reflected from the very title, which the author has explained by email contact: "The quotation (and hence the spelling!) comes from *Epigrams of Martial Book, X, 47*, translated by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey which is included in Tomlinson's edition of *The Oxford Book of Verse in Translation*. Brinton details several varied key influences in Tomlinson's work, and carefully describes how he inherits the sensibility of Latin, British and international authors from several periods. Brinton points out that Tomlinson's literary and emotional legacies are paramount in his production. Therefore, the poet dotes his writing with urbane and civilized values that he admires, showing respect and admiration for certain traditional tenets in his new forms. Ian Brinton has definitely reminded us that as a poet, editor and prolific translator, Charles Tomlinson's oeuvre is an essential ingredient in the renewing process of British poetry today, while looking back at the classics with respect, perspective and admiration.

In my article, I have considered several aspects related to the readership of contemporary British poetry. In doing so, I have taken into account the opinions and the work of the editor Michael Schmidt and the poet Michael Symmons Roberts,

who very kindly accepted to be interviewed for this issue. My experience as poetry university lecturer and the role of some British poetry magazines are also taken into account. Far from intending to be dogmatic, I have aimed at reflecting upon a few elements that are forging a wider poetry reading audience and on others that may also be supportive in that direction.

I hope that the present volume will encourage others to continue reflecting and debating about contemporary British poetry. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all contributors for their work, enthusiasm and patience. I wish to apologise to those who, willing to contribute, could not do so for different reasons. Special and warmest thanks to Michael Symmons Roberts for having accepted being interviewed, for his kindness and time. I am also much indebted to Jeffrey Wainwright for his poems and his generosity.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this volume to the loving memory of David Olive, who was for many years Senior Lecturer of English Literature at Manchester Metropolitan University and sadly passed away in February 2009. Due to our mutual jobs as Erasmus Coordinators, we had the chance to meet at MMU. He introduced me to Angelica Michelis, Jeffrey Wainwright and Michael Schmidt amongst others. Because of all his help, and because, together with his wife, he was a dear friend, may this work serve to pay my humble homage to him and his family.

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