

# Introduction: “Postwar,” “British,” “Irish,” and “Poetry”

*History is now and England.*

The year is 1942 and Britain has been at war for almost three years. Amidst the wreckage of urban aerial bombardment, some of which he directly witnessed as a volunteer air-raid warden, the poet T.S. Eliot contemplates the role poetry might play in the redemption of a fallen world. At a moment that seems to stand outside time, at a site that seems the margin where world and underworld overlap, he confronts a figure for the literary tradition he has inherited, a “familiar compound ghost” who speaks in the voices of Stéphane Mallarmé, William Butler Yeats, and, most of all, Dante. The news for poetry is not good at this moment. Uttered within the world, inextricable from the world, it is, like the world in which it speaks and is spoken, irredeemably fallen. For Eliot, all it can do is fail and in its failure point the way to the real and living possibility of redemption in destruction of all ties to the world. Eliot’s figure for that redemptive destruction condenses the saving flame in which the Holy Spirit appeared to the Apostles at Pentecost and the dive bomber raining destruction on London and Coventry. Now, and in England, history is the purgative and purifying fire of destruction. And yet, at Little Gidding and in “Little Gidding” – the fourth of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* – a stillness is created out of ritual, out of repetition, out of things of the world (like language) turned upon themselves to indicate the presence of divinity in empty spaces and silences.

*Reading Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, First Edition. Michael Thurston and Nigel Alderman.

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## 2 Reading Postwar British and Irish Poetry

Rhythm is the/symphony/of angels.

The year is 2000. For the moment, Britain's wars are mostly cultural, with parties, classes, races, and regions vying for power and position. Resident at a London tattoo studio and clothing shop, where the Poetry Society has placed her for the year, poet Patience Agbabi contemplates the relationship of language and divinity. She hearkens to traditions of inspiration – the literal idea that the poet's words are infused with the breath of a supernatural source – and condenses classical and Christian references in her figure for poetic language. History is nowhere, explicitly, in this short lyric written to celebrate her residency at the Flamin' Eights Tattoo Studio, though it appears throughout Agbabi's work, most often in the form of the same literary tradition (somewhat updated) to which Eliot pays court. In "Off the Shelf," for example, Agbabi engages Yeats through the mediating figure of Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, and in the title poem of her 2000 volume, *Transformatrix*, she takes on the sonnet by synthesizing many of the form's most recognizable traditional voices. Once again, the news for poetry is both good and bad. On the one hand, the dominant lyric tradition Agbabi inherits and encounters is one from which people like her – black, openly bisexual – have been largely excluded. On the other hand, the lyric is reenergized as it is reclaimed: the cultural center is rejuvenated as it is occupied by the once marginalized. Agbabi reclaims, revises, and renews the lyric from her particular cultural position. After all, just a few years after her residency at the tattoo studio, Agbabi served as a writer in residence at Eton. "Wings elevate/words into/rhythm."

Eliot's "Little Gidding" was first published in *The New English Weekly* in October 1942. The magazine had also been the first publisher of the second and third of the *Four Quartets*, "East Coker" and "The Dry Salvages." Descended from the influential *New Age*, a magazine that had in the 1910s and 1920s published a number of modernist writers, *The New English Weekly* had been edited by A.R. Orage until his death in 1934 and continued to be a highly regarded review of English politics, arts, and intellectual life. That December, the poem appeared in a pamphlet form. "Little Gidding" made its first appearance as the concluding movement in Eliot's *Four Quartets* when the group was published together in the United States in May 1943 and then in the British edition in October 1944. The American edition of *Four Quartets* was brought out by Harcourt, Brace and Company and the British edition by Faber and Faber; both had long been Eliot's publishers and he worked as an editor at Faber.

Both companies were important mainstream publishers of poetry (as well as work in other genres) from the 1930s forward. Harcourt had been founded in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the firm grew in stature and importance during the 1930s, while Faber, founded in 1929, quickly became a central publisher of poetry in Britain.

Agbabi's untitled lyric was "published" as a tattoo inscribed by the artist Naresh into the skin of model Joelle Taylor in April 2000. A photograph of that tattoo was reproduced as a postcard and sold by the Poetry Society, the organization under whose auspices Agbabi had been resident at Flamin' Eights. It has not appeared in any of Agbabi's books to date; Michael Thurston discovered the poem in an essay by the critic Lauri Ramey, who has been one of the few to write about this poet, and he consulted the postcard in the Saison Poetry Library.

We could continue in this vein for quite some time, listing the differences between Eliot and Agbabi, from his monarchist politics and High-Church Anglicanism to her radical feminism and association with S/M style, from his Nobel Prize and the scholarly industry that has, for over half a century, produced detailed exegeses of his poems to her performance art and increasingly frequent appearance in surveys of contemporary poetry, avant-garde poetry, and women's poetry in Britain. In short, however, Eliot represents the beginning of the period covered by this book and also certain ideas about poetry and certain institutions and practices involved in the production of poetry, while Agbabi represents the endpoint of this period (the first decade of the twenty-first century) as well as a quite different set of institutions and practices.

The differences are important, of course, but we want also to take note of what the two poets have in common. As even these brief quotations and references suggest, both poets are steeped in the English literary tradition. Both are concerned with the role poetry might play in society. Both are drawn at once to the notion that poetic language is somehow elevated, otherworldly, able to provide access to experience that everyday language cannot capture and to the anxiety that poetic language might distort truth, might mislead readers in unfortunate ways. For all that British poetry has changed since the middle of the Second World War and for all the variety that inheres in "postwar British and Irish poetry," these continuities will remain, perhaps surprisingly, in view.

As the title suggests, this is a book about poetry produced in Britain and Ireland after the Second World War. More than that, though, it is a book about *reading* that poetry, about how to parse the difficulty in some of this

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work, how to describe the pleasures in some of it (difficulty and pleasure are not mutually exclusive), and how to recognize the relationships among parts within a poem and the relationships among poems within this period. In the chapters to come, we hope to show how poets deploy the resources of their medium as well as their attention, care, and passion in their efforts to comprehend their culture and how the efforts of readers to comprehend the poems can open up the texts, revealing their imaginative and linguistic richness and enriching their readers' imaginative and linguistic resources. If those aims are large (and they are), the steps we take toward them are manageably small. We begin, as we have with these excerpts by Eliot and Agbabi, by attending to the words on the page, by remaining aware of how the pages came to our hands, and by wondering about the significance of specific locutions in specific locations.

It is also useful to acknowledge that we come to poems carrying assumptions and that our assumptions might mislead us. Staying with these opening examples for the moment, we might think for a moment about the question of cultural centrality and marginality. Most readers will have heard of T.S. Eliot. His poems are frequently taught in schools and universities, they appear in major anthologies, and they are often referred to in a variety of cultural conversations. His position at Faber and Faber and his Nobel Prize for Literature, along with the reading and reputation of his work, grant him a central position in most narratives of twentieth-century British poetry. Many readers will not be familiar with Patience Agbabi. This is of course partly due to the simple fact of her youth; she has not been producing poems long enough to have achieved an Eliotic reputation. But Agbabi is also less well known because she writes from a marginal cultural position, as a black bisexual woman interested in the oral performance as well as the print publication of poetry.

We tend to assume that one of these poets is central and the other marginal and that these locations are fixed. Let's try reversing these assumptions as something of a heuristic exercise (a heuristic is a sort of shortcut, a fiction held for the moment to suggest some provisional truths). One of these two poets emigrated to England and was awarded a scholarship at Oxford, while the other was born in England and read English literature there. One spent years working at a bank and wrote before and after business hours until a successful literary career could be launched, while the other from early on enjoyed the support of the state. The "marginal" poet of the pair, Agbabi, has in fact inhabited the cultural center represented by Oxford, the Poetry Society, and Edinburgh's

Canongate press, while the “central” poet, Eliot, came to England after university, intending to stay for a short time, remained partly because of the outbreak of war, published his first books with small independent presses, and became a British citizen more than ten years after he took up residence in England. While our original assumptions remain valid (Eliot really *is* at the center of many discussions of twentieth-century poetry and, by virtue of his gender, race, and class, had access to the means of literary production in ways unimaginable to most descendants of Nigerian immigrants to England, like Agbabi), the binary oppositions critics and literary historians use to organize and make sense of the literary landscape, while useful and important, are rarely as neat as they often appear to be. While we will be offering our own binaries in this book and while we find them useful as readers and critics, we will also be reminding readers that these frameworks are critical fictions whose terms should be only lightly and knowingly held.

Before going further with analyses of poems or narratives of poetic careers, we want to spend this introductory chapter making some clear and explicit definitions of the key terms in this volume’s title. Just like such oppositions as center versus margin, terms like “postwar,” “British,” “Irish,” and “poetry” seem to be simple and intuitive, but in fact they obscure judgments that are often both complex and contested. “Postwar,” for example, seems a simple temporal marker, a convenient way of periodizing twentieth-century literature. There is a body of literary expression that was produced before the outbreak of war in 1939, and another produced after the conclusion of hostilities in 1945. Since this dividing line comes close to cutting the century down the middle and since the Second World War is in so many ways a rupture in the story of the century (everyday life throughout Europe, Asia, North Africa, and North America changed in numerous ways because of mobilization and conflict), the war provides a handy cutoff. But there are some problems with this simple organizational approach. For one thing, the century’s pie might be sliced in various ways, and it is not at all clear that the Second World War really divides the period down the middle. The First World War brought about crises and shifts in societies’ self-understandings and their structures at least as fundamental as those associated with the 1939–1945 conflict, so that the first half of the century might need to be seen in several parts (pre-1914, the First World War, and the interwar decades). Similarly, the conclusion of the war in 1945 did not bring about an end to armed and ideological conflicts. The Cold War began in some ways even before the guns fell silent in Europe, and the

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British Empire engaged in numerous smaller conflicts in and over its own colonies during the decades following the war. In addition, the field of reference of the term “postwar” is not literary at all and so might not be the best way to describe a period of literary production. After all, many of the writers active before 1939 continued their careers after 1945 (and wrote during the years between, as well). Even if we agree that the historical dividing line (Britain was one way before 1939 and another after 1945) really is a useful dividing line, are we right to assume that it applies to literature?

There are, after all, more strictly literary (or at least cultural or aesthetic) ways to divide the twentieth century. Chief among these is the shift from modernism, which is seen to dominate the first half of the century, to postmodernism, which rose to prominence during the second half. A problem here, however, is that neither of these terms encompasses anything like the whole of poetic production in either period. While modernism, represented by such poets as Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, and Mina Loy (and, in other genres, by writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett), casts a large shadow over the years between 1910 and 1940, plenty of writers during those decades wrote in ways the term does not explain, account for, or include. By “modernism” we generally mean writing (and other artistic work) that rebels against the conventions that were widely accepted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conventions having to do with “realistic” representation, with narrative coherence, with “appropriate” themes in poetry, and with the order and closure provided by traditional verse forms. Confronting the changes wrought upon their world by new technologies (the telephone, the radio, the automobile), by new ideas (especially the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, the political theories of Karl Marx, the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, and the philosophical work of Nietzsche and Bergson), and, finally, by the Great War’s destruction of assumptions of social and moral coherence, modernist writers and artists deployed fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness narration, intentional incoherence, free verse and other refusals of traditional form, and, often, the heavy use, both as structure and as texture, of allusion to express and attempt to comprehend the chaos in which they found themselves.

At the very same time, however, many, perhaps most, writers in Britain and Ireland either continued writing as they had, and as a couple of generations had, before the 1910s, or they returned to the conventions that had dominated then as an explicit rejection of modernist tenets, practices,

and works. Writers hoping to achieve literary careers through sales of their work in the marketplace tried to deliver what readers wanted, and while *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Molloy* might be the texts from the period most often read (and assigned in classrooms) now, they were not the big sellers of their day. Those were, instead, books like Gertrude Atherton's *Black Oxen* and Warwick Deeping's *Doomsday*. In the poetry world, the lists of the mainstream publishers and the contents of the mainstream magazines continued to feature Georgian verse throughout these decades, and even some of the important poets of the 1930s (W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and others) reacted to modernism by returning to, revising, and rejuvenating traditional forms. The variety of literary styles in play during this, or any, period is one thing that makes temporal markers drawn from literature just as difficult as any other terms we might use.

That variety is, if anything, even more pronounced in the later twentieth century. For the period covered by this volume, the temporally appropriate term might be "postmodernism," but that term has, for three decades now, referred much more frequently and powerfully not to the period following the age of modernism but, instead, to a specific set of philosophical insights and associated aesthetic practices. If Nietzsche was one thinker with whom the modernists were coming to terms, careful readers and critics of Nietzsche, perhaps none more than Jean-François Lyotard, are those whose ideas have informed postmodernists. If many modernists sought to rediscover or rewrite the kind of "grand narratives" that had underpinned the social and artistic order before the Great War and that had been shattered by the war, many postmodernists have been influenced by Lyotard's conviction that the age of these *grand récits* is over. Postmodernism is skeptical not only about the possibility of recovering a coherence that once existed but also about whether that coherence ever existed to begin with. Moreover, postmodernism is skeptical about any singular and incontrovertible truth. There are, instead, multiple truths, their momentary veracity depending upon the circumstances of the moment and the position from which they are examined or experienced. If the great novel of modernism is Joyce's *Ulysses* (and we are not saying it definitively is), then the great novel of postmodernism might be *Gravity's Rainbow*, by the American novelist Thomas Pynchon. Where Joyce looks back to the *Odyssey* as a way to ground the encyclopedic reference and stream-of-consciousness narration in his novel, Pynchon looks around at the momentarily coherent myths of big science and the military industrial complex of and after the

Second World War as a way to erode any sense of solid ground beneath his ironic narrative. And if the great poetic monument of modernism is *The Waste Land* (again, we are not saying it necessarily is), then the great monument of postmodernism is... .

In fact, it is difficult to determine a single great poetic monument of postmodernism, in part because postmodernist poetry (as we will show later in this book) resists the notions of singularity, greatness, monumentality, and, sometimes, poetry itself. Certainly if pushed, we would look to the ironic historical citation of Kamau Brathwaite, to the tricksterish and thoroughly serious slipperiness of Paul Muldoon, or to the experimental or linguistically innovative poetry of J.H. Prynne.

Ultimately, though, we are more interested at this point in explaining why “postmodern” simply will not do as a way to capture poetry produced in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. One reason is simply that the term “postmodern” has come to have such a specific meaning, and the styles to which the term refers, while important, are not the only ones available during these decades. We might point out three useful ways to think about this variety. The first is the continuity of modernism. Some modernist poets continued their careers well into the second half of the century, writing in ways close to, if not identical to, the ways they had before the war. More than this, some of the poetries that we might call postmodernism can also be seen as extensions of modernism itself (indeed, some critics argue that all of postmodernism might more usefully be seen as critically extending modernism). Alongside the continuity of modernism, we can certainly see a reaction against modernism (and postmodernism, for that matter). That reaction takes a number of forms, and we want here to caution against any simple reading of it as a conservative or formalist retrenchment. From the work of “Movement” poets like Philip Larkin through that of Nobel Laureates Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott and on to such present-day poets as Don Paterson, we can see many poets choosing traditional verse forms, continuous narrative, and the expression of a conventionally realistic psychology that stands against core modernist poetic strategies. Finally, the increased access to publication available to poets who, until the 1950s, had quite little – women, people of color, working-class writers, writers from “peripheral” regions within Britain and from the “peripheral” areas of the British Empire – brought new points of view, new areas of subject matter, and new poetic voices into visibility and, eventually, prominence. If, as Eliot wrote in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the classical literary tradition embodied “the mind of Europe,”



poetry in Britain and Ireland in the decades following the Second World War gave voice to multiple minds, both European and not.

“Postmodern poetry,” for these reasons, among others, simply does not do, then, as a way to categorize or describe the work this volume surveys. (Some writers have suggested typographically differentiating terms so that, e.g., “postmodern” might carry the specific philosophical and aesthetic meaning the term has come to have and “post-modern” might indicate simply temporal sequence, but as we have suggested, modernism itself still seems to be in operation and temporality is a vexed and complicated thing when it comes to aesthetic and cultural styles.) Why not, then, choose a simple, straightforward, and, perhaps, noncontroversial term such as “late twentieth-century poetry”? Such terms are unsatisfying for two reasons. First, they get very cumbersome very quickly. The title of this book might already be a bit of a mouthful; imagine it with the extra syllables of “late twentieth and early twenty-first century.” Second, and more important, the simple temporal descriptors leave out important information that “postwar,” for all its potential insufficiency, usefully brings. For if we think about the less immediate effects of the war on literary culture in Britain and Ireland during the decades after 1945, we find important influences on the poetry produced within that culture.

So let’s return to “postwar” and its utility for our purposes. Just as there are problems with “postwar” as a periodizing term with respect to poetry, we have a number of ways to address those problems. Clearly, since the term is indeed in the title of this book, we have found it sufficiently useful to warrant sticking with it. We want to be clear, however, that we are sticking with it, at least partly, as a heuristic, as, that is, a framework that is explicitly recognized as a fiction useful for the insights it enables. On the one hand, then, we can point to some direct ways in which the events of 1939–1945 might have altered the course of poetry in Britain. At the level of subject matter, of course, the war provoked poets to absorb and attempt to comprehend things poets before the war need not (and probably could not) have imagined: enormous numbers of military casualties in protracted and highly mechanized battles, enormous numbers of civilian casualties due to the aerial bombardment of cities, the simple fact of a second outbreak of cataclysmic warfare within a generation of the end of the First World War, the bureaucratized and horrifically efficient conduct of genocide in the death camps of central Europe. And these provocations affected the formal choices that poets made as well. If the fragmentation and confusion of modernist poetry resulted from the dislocations and dissonance attendant upon

the First World War, many poets found those resources insufficient in the face of the daily cataclysm of the Second World War. As we have indicated, while some poets (like Eliot) continued to write in ways fairly continuous with their work of the 1920s, many younger poets sought new ways either to open their work to the stresses of the time or to close the work off from what surrounded it, by returning to the closed lyric forms of the tradition, for example, and to a symbolic vocabulary of myth as opposed to history.

On the other hand, the most powerful changes the war brought about for poetry were not these *immediate* ones but were instead those *mediated* by the institutions in and through which poetry is produced and consumed. While the destruction of cities and the deaths of civilians demanded responses in the moment, the longer-term consequences, to give just a few examples, of demobilized military personnel receiving university educations, of writers educated in the colonies emigrating to pursue their careers in the cities of Britain, of postwar economic hardship and its knock-on effects on social mores (including standards of literary decorum and taste) shaped the literary landscape for the next two generations. We will go into more detail about some of these mediations in the next chapter. For now the point we want to make is that “postwar” serves not just to nominate the period of time after the Second World War but also to suggest the social changes brought about by the war.

While we can make a fairly straightforward case for the usefulness of “postwar,” a term like “British” is more difficult. We can begin to suggest the difficulty by turning to Seamus Heaney, who objected to being characterized as “British” when he was included, and, indeed, given pride of place, in Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s 1983 *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. In “An Open Letter,” published as a pamphlet by the Field Day Theatre Company (located in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland), Heaney pointed out the problem of casual acceptance of terms like “British.” “Be advised,” he wrote, “my passport’s green./No glass of ours was ever raised/To toast *the Queen*” (1985: 25). That green passport, Heaney argues, marks him as Irish, not British. But Heaney grew up and was educated and began his career in, and was a citizen of, Northern Ireland, still (however complicatedly and controversially) part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. National nomenclature, he makes clear in this 198-line poem, matters.

And national nomenclature is complicated. It at once names and obscures the consequences of historical struggle. Setting Heaney’s case to one side for the moment (we’ll return to it when we address “and Irish”

later in this chapter), it is useful to think through what exactly we mean by “British.” Often, especially outside Britain (wherever that is), the term is simply and unconsciously conflated with “English,” so that many Americans, for example, are surprised to discover that Wales and Scotland have their own football/soccer teams. This conflation occludes both the distinctive linguistic, literary, and cultural heritages of Wales and Scotland and the centuries of combat (sometimes military, more often ideological) between the English center and the Scottish and Welsh margins. It is often easy to forget that both Wales and Scotland were subdued by England only after centuries-long military efforts that involved not only large numbers of deaths in battle but also the destruction of Welsh and Scottish towns and villages, the transportation of Welsh and Scottish women and children to England and servitude, and the forcible annexation of Welsh and Scottish territory. Even after the legal unions with England, the ideological conflicts continued, with English efforts to extirpate the Welsh and Scottish languages continuing into the twentieth century and with Welsh and Scottish Nationalists working to preserve their cultural traditions even as they fought – sometimes violently – to keep England, in the form of language and landowners, out.

While Wales was legally joined to England by the sixteenth-century Laws of Wales Acts (the Parliamentary “Acts of Union” granted Royal Assent by Henry VIII in 1536 and 1543) and while Scotland was united with England by corresponding Acts of Union of the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707, Nationalists in both countries have continued to push back against the “United” in United Kingdom. Since the successful devolution referenda in 1997, the governments of Wales and Scotland have taken on some powers once held by the Parliament at Westminster, but Nationalist movements in both countries continue to press for complete independence. Against this horizon, it is not clear that a poet like Gillian Clarke in Wales or a poet like Kathleen Jamie in Scotland is best seen as “British.” Both Clarke and Jamie write in English (though both occasionally include in their poems words or phrases in their countries’ local languages). The question becomes more vexed still when we ask it about Gwyneth Lewis, who writes in both English and Welsh, or Menna Elfyn, who writes only in Welsh, or, similarly, when we ask it about Don Paterson or Tom Leonard, who often write in Scottish dialect, or Robert Garioch or Sorley MacLean, who wrote mostly in Scots Gaelic.

And what of writers from parts of the world more recently colonized by Britain and, in many cases, more fully released from the empire after the

Second World War? One of the material circumstances included in “postwar,” of course, is the shrinking of the British Empire from the late 1940s through the 1960s. The combination of Britain’s deep economic difficulties after the war (the nation was left almost bankrupt by the war’s end) and anticolonial agitation in some of the empire’s distant possessions led ultimately to the withdrawal of British control and the winning of independence by the people of India, Ceylon, and Burma in the 1940s, of most of Britain’s African colonies by the end of the 1950s, and of Caribbean colonies in the 1960s. Several effects followed upon these episodes of decolonization: the British economy was affected by the loss of overseas markets, immigration to Britain from the colonies accelerated, and a widespread sense of political and cultural failure – of the end of the British Empire’s century of global expansion and dominance – appeared throughout British writing.

Most germane for us are the ways decolonization affected literary culture. For example, literary institutions independent of the metropole grew up in some former colonies. Theater companies, writing workshops, small magazines, and publishers supported the local literary scenes, in which, often, the legacy of colonial education (including a thorough steeping in the classics of the English literary tradition) mingled with local languages, belief systems, historical references and narrative, and even musical styles to produce hybrid voices and forms. At the same time, increasing immigration beginning in the late 1940s brought a number of writers, with their colonial educations, experiences, and accents, to the cities of the British archipelago, where they became involved in a newly emergent immigrant literary culture.

The question that these biographies, careers, and works pose for us at this point is, how and to what extent are these writers or their works “British”? Poets like Kamau Brathwaite (from Barbados), David Dabydeen (Guyana), Jean “Binta” Breeze (Jamaica), or Sujata Bhatt (India) are often included in anthologies of British poetry or British literature and in syllabi for courses on British literature or British poetry. Are they British because they were born in colonies that had yet to win their independence, because they were partially educated in the British Isles or spent part of their working lives there, or because their work has something thematic to do with life in London or Leeds as well as Kingston or Gujarat? At the same time, some poets very important in the literary cultures of (former) colonies – Lorna Goodison (Jamaica), Christopher Okigbo (Nigeria), even Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott (St. Lucia) – often do not appear in these anthologies,

though their claims for significance are at least as compelling and their work's relation to matters "British" is just as (in)direct. Any simple standard for inclusion (or exclusion) that we could set here would present as many problems as it solved. We could include as "British" poets from former colonies who spent some of their working lives in the British Isles or whose work appeared under the auspices of publishers located in the British Isles, but these measures would leave out poets and poems that have been influential on subsequent poets in Britain and have had powerful cultural effects within Britain.

Some critics – Jahan Ramazani, among others – have argued that the ease and frequency of transatlantic travel, for poems as well as for poets, has rendered these national labels obsolete. Given the changes of location and, sometimes, of citizenship for poets in the twentieth century, it might make sense to define taxonomies beyond the national. Our position on the utility of "British" as a descriptor for the poetry we treat in this book is something like our position on "postwar": as a self-consciously and somewhat ironically or tenuously held guideline, it helps us to include poets who, for a variety of reasons, are important within a literary landscape whose borders, while shifting and porous, are in some general ways discernible. Often, they are best discerned by noting differences rather than by trying to define essences. By "British," for example, we know, generally, that we do not mean poets born, educated, and mostly published in the United States. ("American," of course, is as contested in its ways as "British" is, but that is the subject of some other book's first chapter.) Postwar American poets of various kinds work to comprehend a culture driven by rising consumerism, by sudden ascendancy to superpower status, and by Cold War tensions construed as bipolar (the United States vs. USSR). These were not the concerns faced by most British poets, whether they wrote in Bristol or Bridgetown. The vastness of the American landscape, made newly accessible by the construction of the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s as well as the widespread availability of automobiles and very cheap petroleum, fueled the imaginations of many American poets in the first decades after the war. Many British poets confronted a sense of straitened opportunities and immobility. Postwar American poets enjoyed the rise of creative writing programs and an increasing number of university teaching positions in the 1950s, as well as a number of new literary magazines associated with colleges and universities that provided publishing outlets and a thriving cultural conversation about poetry and poetics. British poets tended to have fewer opportunities to teach at universities, but many found support from the state (in the forms

of fellowships and bursaries) and occasional employment with the BBC. The differences in these institutional literary support systems help us sketch what is distinctive about postwar British poetry, as opposed to American.

Even a differential definition of “British” in this context is one to hold as a productive problem rather than a confident assumption. Some important poets who began their careers in Britain (Thom Gunn, Donald Davie) moved permanently to the United States. Others (Ted Hughes, Fred D’Aguiar, Geoffrey Hill) took up teaching posts in the United States and then returned to Britain either permanently or repeatedly. By the same token, some writers of the so-called British Poetry Revival in the late 1960s and 1970s were heavily influenced by American Beat poets and the experimental work of Americans Charles Olson and Ed Dorn, while Sylvia Plath, born and educated in Massachusetts, moved to Devon with Hughes, her husband, and died in London during the bitter winter of 1963. Nevertheless, the texture of Hill’s work (though he lived and taught for decades in Boston, Massachusetts) is inescapably English, from the Midlands settings and Anglo-Saxon histories of *Mercian Hymns* to the deeply dyed threads of allusion throughout his oeuvre, while a sense of alienation, of being not quite at home abroad, suffuses the poetry of Gunn in San Francisco and Plath in London. While the complications are worth admitting into arguments and readings, the distinctions indicated by these national labels continue to be at once legible and useful.

We promised, a while ago, to come back to “and Irish,” and the time has come to do so. In “Open Letter,” Heaney chafes at the “British” label in spite of (or because of) his upbringing in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The image of the green passport as a figure for Irishness seems not to recognize the border that has, since 1922, separated the six counties of Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. While it shares some aspects with the broader problem of (post)coloniality (and, indeed, it has been studied in precisely these terms during the last two decades) and while it bears a strong resemblance to the situation in Wales or Scotland, the relation of Irishness to Britishness, poetically as well as politically, is an especially vexed one after the brutal history of repression in Ireland and the continuing sectarian troubles and tensions following partition and the establishment of the Free State. We acknowledge that peculiarly difficult history here by at once including Irish poetry with British and separating Irish poetry from British. That’s a lot of work for the conjunction “and” to do, however, so let’s take a moment to flesh out the specifics of the relationship the word constructs.

To begin with, we need to make clear that by “Irish” we mean poetry produced on the island of Ireland without regard to the border separating Northern Ireland and the Republic. While the political boundary retains controversial significance in the realm of international relations and while there may indeed be differences between the institutional matrices and the broad poetic palates on either side of the border, we are persuaded by the argument put forward by Seamus Deane, an important figure in the Field Day Theatre Company and publishing group and editor of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, that the island as a whole shares a history and culture best understood not as fractured along its internal border but by its relationship with Britishness. Under this reasoning, Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (all from the Republic) and John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, and Ciaran Carson (all from Northern Ireland) are Irish poets.

What, though, of that relationship to Britishness? On the one hand, most poets writing on the island in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries write and have written in English (though in saying this we should note the tremendous achievement of Irish-language poets). In addition to writing in the English language, these poets are deeply informed by the English poetic tradition. We see this, for example, in Heaney’s and Muldoon’s predilection for the sonnet and in their habit of alluding to Anglo-Saxon and Renaissance English poets. On the other hand, the specific character of the Irish social and political situation and the specific linguistic and literary legacies of Irish culture also profoundly shape these poets’ work. Irish myths and legends, Irish place names, words, and figures of speech appear in poems by all of these poets (and many of their contemporaries). Part of the brilliance of Irish poetry in the twentieth century has been the fusing of these strands to create startling and powerful hybrids. In “The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants,” for example, Muldoon adapts the rhyme scheme, and often the iambic pentameter, of the Shakespearean sonnet as his stanza, but he puts that stanza to work in a madcap narrative tracing an Irish character (Gallogly, whose name derives from “gallowglass,” in Irish, *gallóglaich*, meaning mercenary warrior) through a series of adventures in and around Belfast. Much of the island’s poetry is itself constructed by something like our “and”; it synthesizes British and Irish languages, allusions, tropes, and narratives. This productive tension is one we hope to keep in play both in the title of this volume and in our discussions of Irish poetry in the chapters to follow.

While the final word in our title seems simple, it will probably come as no surprise after the preceding discussions of “postwar,” “British,” and “Irish” that “poetry,” too, requires some glossing. Think for a moment of the brief text by Patience Agbabi we discussed at the beginning of this chapter: a few short lines incised into the skin of a model and photographed to be reproduced on a postcard. Is such a text what readers typically have in mind when they use the word “poetry”? Aren’t poems more substantial? Aren’t they intended for printing on paper and reproduction in the pages of magazines and books, rather than tattooing on skin and reproduction on postcards? At the same time, given the obviously wrought character of Agbabi’s language and that language’s simultaneous naming and performance of features associated with poetic form, upon what grounds could we disqualify the text for the label “poetry”?

Confronting the experimental texts produced by concrete poets, “language poets,” or sound poets, texts in which meaning is subordinated to material properties of language, many readers respond by denying that such texts are poetry. Poetry, they might say, is supposed to be expressive. It is supposed to provide access to intellectual understanding and emotional experience. It is supposed to be the arrangement of meaningful language into aesthetically pleasing patterns, including but not limited to meter, rhyme, and traditional stanzas. Poetry is that sort of literary expression represented by such grand monuments of the literary tradition as the sonnets of Shakespeare, the blank verse of Milton, and the “emotion recollected in tranquility” of Wordsworth. It is the literary expression continued after modernism in the work of such recognizably “poetic” poets as Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney. At the same time, some readers and writers (far fewer than the type we just described) who value experimental work find the regularly metrical and rhyming stanzas (or the free-verse first-person confessional lyric that has come to dominate the pages of many literary reviews) to be mere “verse” rather than poetry. For these readers, poetry is not a matter of expression in skillfully arranged (and conventionally recognizable) language. It is instead the turning of language upon itself to reveal or unleash an authenticity that is typically hidden by conventions of meaning or expression. Poetic language is characterized precisely by its resistance to instrumentality or clear communication. It is the irruption of the chaotic “real” into the conventional “normal,” the interruption of the settled “said” by the open-ended “saying.”



A survey of the catalogs of poetry publishers, of the range of literary magazines that publish poetry, of the critical studies produced by academics and the polemics of practitioners, of the blogs and online discussions devoted to poetry and poetics shows that each of these positions, and pretty much any point between them, has its adherents in the contemporary poetry scene. A retrospective look like the one Peter Barry provides in his 2006 book, *Poetry Wars*, reveals similar fault lines in the literary landscape three decades ago; when experimental “radicals” who had no patience for mainstream verse took over the Poetry Society and its magazine in the early 1970s, mainstream poets who scorned the “antiliterary” productions of the “radicals” fought back to regain control of the institution. Neither side had much good to say either about its antagonists or their “poetry.” And if we look back farther still, we find in the prefaces to antithetical anthologies and the pages of reviews scathing articulations of the line between “poetry” and its opposites or others.

Our practice in this book is to read as “poetry” what is offered by poets or publishers under that label. Rather than drawing boundaries or offering limit cases, we are interested in how different ideas about poetry produce different kinds of poetry, in how these different sorts of poetry address the specific challenges of their historical moment, and in how the varieties of poetry themselves produce new ways of reading poems, as well as writing them.

In the chapters that follow, we first sketch the historical situations of British and Irish poetry in the postwar decades. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of major historical events and trends that shaped this period. In Chapter 3 we focus on the literary institutions that are the closest and most immediately important context for poetry, from educational institutions through publishers (large and small), magazines (large and small), and the range of formal and informal networks established by workshops and collectives. The body of this book is the set of chapters that follow these framing chapters. In them, we at once offer readings of some important poems and suggest ways to read these poems and others like them. We have arranged the poems along formal and thematic lines. Chapter 4 follows several formal and generic paths through postwar poetry, focusing in turn on the sonnet, the elegy, and the ekphrasis. In Chapter 5, we turn to poems of place, poems in which the landscape is explored and interpreted. One force often read in the landscape is history, and in Chapter 6 we turn to poems that contemplate the writing of history more explicitly. Chapter 7 returns to genre as its central preoccupation; in it, we discuss

several types of long poem: the phenomenological meditation, the fragmented epic, the narrative poem, the lyric sequence, and the “slim volume” of lyrics as a unified poetic work. In Chapter 8, we survey a range of poetic explorations of subjectivity and identity. We close the frame opened by Chapters 1–3 in Chapter 9, by suggesting some ways in which the poets we discuss throughout the book might productively be thought of in groups and movements through the anthologies they make. We conclude with a brief gesture toward the range of poetics that in various ways lie beyond the key words of this volume’s title.