A COMPANION TO

TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY

EDITED BY NEIL ROBERTS
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A COMPANION TO

TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY

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Introduction

Neil Roberts

The subject of this volume, twentieth-century poetry in English, is vast, heterogeneous and paradoxical. To say that it attempts to represent the poetry of a hundred years and more than twenty countries is to suggest only one dimension of the difficulty of the project. The phrase ‘in English’ is no mere neutral description, but signifies a complex, violent and still bitterly felt political and cultural history: some contributors question the division between poetry in English and other languages, and rightly transgress it; for others the historical role of the English language in shaping the culture and consciousness of poets is itself the main theme. This subject exists because of the successive historical phenomena of British imperialism and American cultural, economic and political dominance. The volume begins with the transatlantic connection in modernism and ends with contemporary postcolonial poetry. The trajectory of the century – of the English language and its poetry – is from a predominantly bipolar axis to an increasingly decentred heterogeneity. The country in which the English language originated had already ceded the leading role to America in the modernist era, and by the end of the century its current poetic production has little influence on the rest of the Anglophone world. If poetry from England still manages to hold up its head in this volume it is partly because of the still powerful influence of the country’s cultural past, and partly no doubt due to the nationality of the editor.

‘English’ exerts an undeniable if not always welcome influence on all the poets discussed in this book. However, it must also be stressed that poetry, unlike the novel, is genuinely universal; it is not an Anglophone, nor a European cultural invention. It can draw on a potentially inexhaustible multiplicity of roots, and however marginal or irrelevant it may seem to have become in some parts of the English-speaking world, no one has ever spoken of the ‘death of poetry’ as some spoke (perhaps prematurely) not long ago about the death of the novel. Even Theodor Adorno did not quite go that far.
The terms ‘modernism’ and ‘postcolonial’ remind us that this is a century in which poetry has not only been written and discussed, but the writing and discussion have been exceptionally closely related. To a large extent the writers of poetry have defined the terms in which the criticism of poetry has been conducted. It is a century in which poetry has been overwhelmingly self-conscious and self-reflexive. Taking their lead from writers and visual artists on the European continent, above all France, the men and women in the English-speaking world who wrote the poetry that later came to be labelled ‘modernist’ gathered together in explicit movements, wrote manifestos and largely created the cultural environment in which their work was received. Writers such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had an influence hugely disproportionate to their number, or to the sales of their books. As the century progressed this tendency persisted, though the groups became more disparate. Hence the importance of poetic movements in the organization of this book. Some groups of poets, such as the Black Mountain and Language poets, formed conscious alliances and articulated shared principles. Other movements, such as Confessionalism and the so-called ‘Movement’ itself, were named by others, but the poets profited from the labels, which gave their utterances a more than individual authority, even if they often distanced themselves from the labels.

Throughout the twentieth century poetry has had an immensely important and uncomfortable relationship with the academy. William Carlos Williams condemned Eliot for handing poetry to the academics, and there are many poets who have at different times abused university departments of English and accepted salaried posts from them. Especially in America, to be a professional poet almost necessarily means teaching writing in a university, and in the latter part of the century, especially in postcolonial studies and the influence of poststructuralism on writers such as the Language poets, the discourse of writers and the discourse of academics have merged.

However, if one image, and perhaps the most numerically accurate, of the poet is the unheroic one of a man or woman in a classroom, there are other images no less real, if less numerous, of poets dying on battlefields in Flanders, Spain or Biafra, poets enduring hardship and poverty for their art, poets in prison for their political convictions, poets in Ginsberg’s phrase ‘destroyed by madness’. And they may of course be the same people: Wole Soyinka is not the only one to have seen the inside of both a classroom and a prison cell.

One has to admit, though, that the heroic image of a Wilfred Owen, a Ken Saro-Wiwa or a Soyinka fails to conceal the fact that poetry’s relation to the main tendencies of twentieth-century history and culture has largely been one of disapproving marginality. Inheriting an already slightly tarnished Arnoldian conception of culture as a value to be set against the dominant civilization, the ‘modernists’ (at least the Anglophone poets who set the agenda of literary modernism) were – despite the label later attached to them – notoriously, like Pound’s Mauberley, ‘out of key with [their] time’. As the reading public grew in size, the proportion of it that was interested in poetry shrank dramatically. As the century wore on, many poets must have harboured
an alter ego like Tony Harrison’s skinhead who mocks, ‘It’s not poetry we want in this class war’.

Looking back from the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, I find myself forming contradictory impressions. Poetry in the English language is practised on every continent: there is more of it, and it is more various, than at any time before. At the same time, at least in those countries most responsible for the spread of the language, its cultural importance seems questionable. This apparent paradox is perhaps explained by a first-world perspective. The universality of poetry, on which I have already remarked, assures that it will continue to be written and received in some form. However, the elitist modern conception of poetry (a description that I don’t intend abusively – it produced the greatest poetry of the century) which still influences the practice, social role and reception of the art, will surely not survive. The global erosion of the centre–periphery structure, most dramatically witnessed by the fact that the most celebrated living Anglophone poet, Derek Walcott, comes from a tiny Caribbean island, may be reflected within societies and nations. There is evidence of this in some of the chapters on contemporary poetry, and on national poetries.

The critical discussion of poetry, like that of all art, entails dizzying shifts of perspective. It cannot be understood without awareness of an immense historical context, yet it can be dependent for its power on a single word resonating in the mind of a reader. This necessitates a corresponding range of discourses, from William W. Cook’s statistical account of the movement of African Americans in the first half of the century, to John Osborne’s close reading of the syntax, rhythm and line-endings of a single poem by Robert Creeley. The tasks addressed by the contributors vary enormously, from the history of the poetry of a whole continent to the elucidation of an individual volume. It is this latter aspect of the book, the ‘Readings’ section, which is likely to provoke most debate, since any gesture towards canon formation (or reinforcement) is intensely controversial. The texts chosen are best considered as a selection of the most influential, widely discussed and characteristic poetry of the period; the concentration on specific volumes a recognition that even the most canonical poetry is born of a particular historical moment.

These essays were being written as all of us were making the adjustment to thinking of the twentieth century as a period of the past, as the possibilities for what twentieth-century poetry in English might be were finally exhausted and determinate. At the same time, this past is of course not sealed off from us, and our understanding of the century is inseparable from our feeling for the present and the contemporary. Hence the volume ends with consideration of the poetry still being written, that may form the starting point, if such things are still produced, of a Companion to Twenty-first Century Poetry. In those essays above all the authors are committed to the first-hand response and judgement that characterizes all worthwhile criticism. Several of the contributors are themselves publishing poets, and in one case at least, that of Sean O’Brien, it is certain that his own work would have featured if the chapter had been written by someone else.
In the twentieth century more people spoke English than in the whole of
previous history, and more people wrote poetry than in the whole of previous
history. I think this book registers something of the crowded life of the extra-
ordinary century, even as it struggles to bring it under some kind of control.
PART I
Topics and Debates
In September 1908 the young American poet, John Gould Fletcher (1886–1950), left Harvard University for Europe. In his autobiography, *Life Is My Song* (1937), Fletcher explains the reasons for his pilgrimage:

I had come abroad to try to acquire an education, to learn something concerning the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual values by which man was made worthy of the world he lived in, and which had created man’s highest civilizations. . . . Were there values in Europe, were there values anywhere in the world, which were living and functioning vitally in sufficient strength, to enable me to build up anything from my own American background, to make anything more of myself than a complete failure of adjustment to the standards of my country and my people? I had come to Europe, at all events, to find out. And I knew from the outset that my exile would be neither a short nor an easy one. (Fletcher, 1937, p. 34)

Fletcher here articulates some of the motives that impelled idealistic poets of his generation into self-exile: a profound alienation from contemporary America, an uncertain sense of identity, a yearning for permanent aesthetic and spiritual values, and a readiness to search for such values in the great centres of European civilization. In London Fletcher found, if not the grail of his quest, at least a congenial company of like-minded seekers. By 1910 he had joined the Guild Socialist movement, and by 1914 he was engaged in the poetic revolution known as Imagism.

Fletcher’s progress exemplifies the interaction of European and American energies that gave rise to modernist poetry in English during the early decades of the twentieth century. The innovative, experimental verse that helped to shape the sensibility of several succeeding generations grew out of a restless, dynamic nexus of international contacts. With these transatlantic connections in mind, scholars sometimes characterize the revolution in the arts of the period as ‘International Modernism’ (Kenner, 1988, pp. 3–4).
International modernism arose in a world of improved communications, commerce and travel. Transoceanic telegraphy, wireless radio and superior shipping dramatically accelerated the transmission of words, documents and people. Travel between Europe and North America came within the reach of groups who could not previously afford it. Appropriately enough, two influential patrons of modernist writing – Winifred Ellerman and Nancy Cunard – were heiresses of wealthy shipping magnates. The ‘global village’ of Marshall McLuhan was not yet in sight, but a transatlantic community had swum into ken.

This link between culture and technology involved a historical irony, for the proponents of a cosmopolitan cultural vision tended to be critics of industrialism and rampant capitalism. When Matthew Arnold advocated an international standard of culture in his influential treatise *Culture and Anarchy* (1867–8), he wrote in opposition to a provincial philistinism that he associated with bourgeois profit-seeking. In turn-of-the-century America, young writers to whom Arnold’s analysis appealed deplored the triumph of this materialism even as they benefited from the prosperity, leisure and mobility that it provided. They were the first generation of Americans who could afford to take Arnold’s prescriptions to heart as educational imperatives.

To observers on both sides of the Atlantic, the pursuit of material wealth seemed to dominate the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The novelist and short-story writer, Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941), described the years in which he grew up as

> the most materialistic age in the history of the world, when wars would be fought without patriotism, when men would forget God and only pay attention to moral standards, when the will to power would replace the will to serve and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward the acquisition of possessions. (Anderson, 1997, p. 57)

These developments had only begun to affect the rural community of which Anderson wrote in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), but their effects are full-blown in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Here the ethos of the so-called Gilded Age is personified by the degenerate mining millionaire, Dan Cody, from whom Jay Gatsby absorbs his meretricious version of the American Dream.

The coarsening of the moral and aesthetic fibre of America in the late nineteenth century impelled some artists and writers to pull up stakes, and others to dig in. One group expatriated themselves, choosing self-exile in a European society whose upper-middle class, at least until 1914, was more securely established and more receptive to the arts than was its American equivalent. The other group of artists and writers stayed at home, choosing to combat Babbitry on its native ground. (The protagonist of Sinclair Lewis’s satirical novel, *Babbitt*, published in 1922, became a byword for the self-righteous and hypocritical boosterism that flourished in many American small towns.)
Although the indigenists sometimes criticized the expatriates as turncoats and cowards, the division between them was more apparent than real. Both groups were fighting the same cultural battle, and both were fundamentally internationalist. They travelled and published on both sides of the Atlantic, and they collaborated closely with European artists who were combating similar trends in their countries. Only an international alliance of artists could mount an effective resistance against the transnational forces that seemed to threaten the life of the spirit.

In what follows, we will chart some of the transatlantic connections among modernist poets by focusing upon major centres of creative activity. We will look first at the European centres, especially London and Paris, where American expatriates such as John Gould Fletcher congregated with kindred spirits in an endeavour to renew Old World ideals. Then we will examine the American centres, especially New York and Chicago, where the indigenists collaborated with European expatriates who shared their vision of New World possibilities.

Like John Gould Fletcher, many American expatriates who came abroad before the Great War of 1914–18 found a congenial home in London. No other literary community in the English-speaking world offered such advantages to ambitious young writers: a wealth of literary publishers and periodicals, a receptive and liberal audience devoted to spiritual pursuits, a venerable and prestigious literary tradition, and an established poetic discourse acknowledged by writers, publishers and readers alike. Moreover, these advantages were no less available to aspirants from the British colonies and former colonies than to home-country hopefuls. Among the important modern poets who began their careers in Edwardian and Georgian London are Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, ‘H. D.’ (Hilda Doolittle) and Robert Frost.

The career of Ezra Pound (1885–1972) illustrates the opportunities that London offered to new arrivals. Pound reached the capital in December 1908 and stepped almost immediately into an extensive literary network. He soon met William Butler Yeats, whom he considered the greatest living poet, and Ford Madox Ford, who published Pound in the *English Review* and tutored him in the aesthetics of modern French fiction. Pound also attended meetings of an informal poets’ club convened by T. E. Hulme and F. S. Flint, whose discussions often centred upon the role of images in poetic communication.

Into these cosmopolitan circles, Pound was generously accepted. He soon had a regular publisher, Elkin Mathews, who brought out five volumes of the young American’s work between December 1908 and May 1913. Pound regularly contributed poetry and prose to the *New Age*, a Guild Socialist weekly edited by A. R. Orage. He lectured on early medieval European literature at the Regent Street Polytechnic, and J. M. Dent published the lectures as *The Spirit of Romance* (1910). He was introduced to Olivia Shakespear, a novelist and an intimate friend of Yeats; and five years later, in 1914, he married Mrs Shakespear’s daughter, Dorothy. ‘Am by way of falling into the croud [sic] that does things here’, Pound told William Carlos Williams. ‘London, deah old lundon is the place for poesy’ (Pound and Williams,

Like Pound, Robert Frost (1874–1963) found London to be the place for poesy. Unable to obtain a publisher for his work in the United States, Frost brought his family to England in 1912. There, he befriended Edward Thomas, Lascelles Abercrombie, and others among the Georgian school of poets. David Nutt and Co. agreed to publish Frost’s first two books of poetry, A Boy’s Will (1913) and North of Boston (1914). The favourable reviews of his work on both sides of the Atlantic whetted the interest of American publishers. When he returned to the United States in 1915, Frost was taken up by Henry Holt and Company of New York, who remained his principal publisher for the rest of his long and successful career. Although Frost never intended his transatlantic exile to be permanent, his trip across the ocean was indispensable to his launching as a poet.

Meanwhile, Pound was forming a cosmopolitan alliance with other young poets who lived in London. The Imagists, as they called themselves, included Pound’s old Philadelphia friend, Hilda Doolittle (1888–1961), who was just beginning her European expatriation under the pen-name of ‘H. D.’ The English poets and translators, F. S. Flint and Richard Aldington, threw in with the Americans, and Aldington consolidated the bonds even further by marrying H. D.

The principal outlets for the writing that emerged from the movement were no less transatlantic than its personnel. Poems and manifestos appeared in London (in the Egoist and the New Age), New York (in Others) and Chicago (in Poetry, of which Pound became Foreign Editor). The heroic age of the international little magazine was getting under way, and a heady mixture of work by British, Irish and American authors might be found in almost any issue of the liveliest periodicals.

The new movement also had a Continental flavour. Imagisme, as it was sometimes styled, aped the cultural politics of the French and Italian avant-garde schools such as Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism. Outrageous proclamations, interviews and readings attracted media attention and shocked bourgeois sensibilities. Furthermore, the Imagist advocacy of free verse had a French dimension because turn-of-the-century French poets had taken up and developed the legacy of Walt Whitman as an alternative to the hegemony of fixed forms in their tradition. When Pound and Flint promoted a poetry of ‘the musical phrase’, they were thinking less of Whitman than of the vers libre and other metrical experiments of Parisian poets such as Remy de Gourmont, Jules Romains, Charles Vildrac, Emile Verhaeren and others (see Pound, 1954, p. 3, and Pound, 1913). The free-verse tradition in modern English-language poetry originated in America with Whitman, but one branch of it returned to its home only after a detour through Paris and London. Such a journey is thoroughly characteristic of modernism’s transatlantic circulations.

Imagism is probably the most important single movement in English-language poetry of the twentieth century. Hardly any prominent poet of Pound’s generation and the next two after it went untouched by Imagist theory and practice. The aesthetic of Imagism might nowadays be called minimalist. It emphasized a romantic