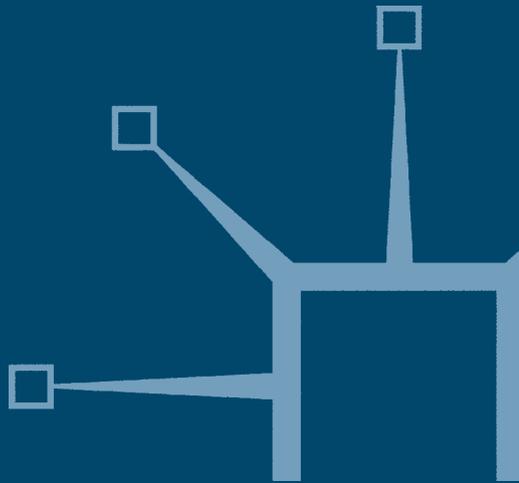# Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism

Dialogue and Estrangement

Ian Gregson

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POSTMODERNISM
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To Sue, Jean and Paul

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

This book's division into two parts is meant to suggest comparisons and contrasts between "mainstream" poetry and kinds of modernist writing which have been regarded, or are still regarded, as outside that pale. Part of its point is to draw attention to the neglect which has been suffered by the three senior poets Roy Fisher, Christopher Middleton and, to a lesser extent Edwin Morgan who are discussed in the second section. However, I also wish to celebrate the exciting achievements of the mainstream and to redefine the nature of those achievements in what seem to me the most appropriate terms.

Most of the causes for the marginalising of Fisher, Middleton and Morgan have their sources in literary history rather than in what is happening currently. The careers of all three ought to have taken off in the early 60s when each of them started to produce their best work. Unfortunately for them that was a period of exceptional narrowness in the outlook of those in charge of the commanding heights of the poetic economy. In particular, a powerful prejudice was operating – thanks to the realist legacy of the Movement – against the Modernist tradition to which all three owed allegiance. In coining the term "retro-modernist" to describe these poets I am referring to this allegiance and also distinguishing them from postmodernists like John Ashbery – this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

"Estrangement", then, refers to the way in which Fisher, Middleton and Morgan were (and to some extent still are) outsiders in British poetry. However, it also refers to what I take to be their most characteristic poetic strategy – their deployment of a relentless defamiliarising that is radically opposed to the consensual assumptions of the Movement. The realism of Larkin and the others depends upon a technique that implicitly, but consistently, refers to experiences and attitudes which are shared by poet and reader – it appeals, in other words, to a sense of familiarity. By contrast, the retro-modernism of Morgan, Fisher and Middleton wilfully,

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stubbornly, sometimes playfully but sometimes, also, austerely, insists on strangeness and difficulty. For this reason, it is the theorising of the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky which provides the most fruitful access to their poetry. In his essay "Art as Technique"[1] he refers to the way in which "If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic" (11). As an illustration of this he quotes a passage from Tolstoy's diary in which the novelist describes being unable to remember whether he had dusted a divan because the action of doing so had become so "habitual and unconscious" (12), and so, Shklovsky says, "life is reckoned as nothing":

> Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*
>
> (12)

Donald Davie has related this passage to Roy Fisher's description of himself as a "1920s Russian modernist" who subjects experience to "a slow-motion dismemberment"[2]. For in his repeated evocations of urban landscapes Fisher has used a wide range of techniques to overcome the way in which, through habit, those landscapes are perceptually erased. This has involved his poetry in a continual argument with realism whose project Fisher respects and whose techniques of detailed notation he deploys, but whose consensual assumptions he half-reluctantly but consistently deconstructs. What has especially concerned him is the way that the "real" changes according to the levels and kinds of subjectivity from which it is perceived: estrangement for Fisher is crucially achieved by moving from the hard clarity and objectivity of imagist techniques to effects which insinuate distortive states of mind and, beyond them, to effects which are sometimes painfully expressionist or wildly or playfully surrealist.

As Stan Smith points out, Christopher Middleton is similarly indebted to the theory of estrangement:

This classical yet human distance is maintained by a deliberate employment of that "defamiliarisation" technique described by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (whom Middleton acknowledges on several occasions). The disjunctions, dislocations and unexpected collocations of his language, the experimental diversity of structure and theme, and a movement between extremes of abstrusity and explicitness, using the very opacity of his language to concentrate our gaze as if for the first time on familiar object and event, all enable Middleton to pursue that "defining of enigmas" which is for him the poetic vocation, exposing us to "the strangeness of being alive. . .the strangeness of living things outside oneself".[3]

This stress on strangeness is also evident in Edwin Morgan – even, paradoxically, in his Scottish nationalism. His scepticism about obsessively nationalist writing is one part of a generally centrifugal tendency in his outlook: he fears that self-consciously Scottish writing may distort experience, including Scottish experience, by artificially freezing it at a vanished historical moment and fencing it off from the rest of the world. This is anathema to him because one of his major concerns is that poetry should evolve strategies that enable it to cope with experience which is constantly unfixing the boundaries of the past. He worries, therefore, that a simplistic nationalism tries to impose fixed limits which misrepresent the shifting and elusive nature of the modern world. So he uses estrangement techniques partly in opposition to conservative nationalists who harp on the familiarity of the familiar. For those techniques suggest that a native place can only be thoroughly understood in the context of other places: they assume, too, that experience is radically unstable and that what is reassuringly fixed about familiar places and things is an illusion.

Inevitably, there is something self-consciously cerebral, even austerely so, about the rigorous application of estrangement techniques and this provides an important clue to why modernism has had a hard time in Britain where even many of the intellectuals are anti-intellectual. There is perhaps no more telling sign of the continuing

effect of this than the immense popularity of the crudely anti-modernist poetry of Wendy Cope.

On the other hand, mainstream poets in Britain have consistently raided modernism and employed its techniques for their own ends – Larkin repeatedly used imagism and Audenesque montage while subordinating them to a dominantly realist context, thereby subjecting them to a kind of repressive tolerance. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he evolved a poetic whose first concern was to establish a consensus with his readers based on shared experience – but that this poetic evolved through a dialogue with modernism can be seen clearly in his most important poem "The Whitsun Weddings". This amounts to a realist rereading of *The Waste Land's* fertility metaphor. What does all that Jessie Weston stuff really mean to someone living in industrial mid-twentieth century England? Something like this: numerous couples heading on the same train towards their wedding nights in a London "spread out in the sun/ Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat," and then "A sense of falling, like an arrow shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain".

What characterises the generations after Larkin is a growing refusal to allow one stylistic idiom to dominate – modernist and realist techniques jostle with each other in their work, producing a greater open-endedness than in the poetry of the Movement, a sense of a plurality of voices. Douglas Dunn, for example, starts out in *Terry Street*[4] looking like a realist poet influenced by Larkin. However, even in that first book there are other influences at work which insist on the importance of narrative point of view – the centre of consciousness moves deliberately from the poet to the street's residents and back again in a way that subverts any single-minded sense of what "reality" is. There are even in *Terry Street* hints of a surreal element in Dunn's thinking and this acquires increasing importance later linked to a powerfully political consciousness which insists on opposing dominant ideologies with an exploration of how profoundly different the world looks when it is viewed from the margins, when the voices of the politically muted are allowed to speak.

This mingling of the real and the surreal in Douglas Dunn is an example of the tendency of post-Movement mainstream poets to deploy a stylistic "mélange". This is a postmodernist phenomenon to the extent that it self-consciously upsets expectations and destabilises any authoritative vision of the world, and the writing of these poets (Paul Muldoon, James Fenton, Craig Raine) is often playful,

self-reflexive and parodic in the approved postmodernist way. However, once again the ability of the British to domesticate movements like this, to translate, assimilate and at the same time crucially alter them is in evidence. So where the work of thorough postmodernists is about the relentless deconstruction of the "real", there is in the work of even the most postmodernist of British poets a tendency to accord the real a residual respect and allow it a residual place.

Consequently, while recent mainstream British poetry has assimilated postmodernist concerns with self-reflexive fictiveness and with the way that language distorts and even constitutes the experiences it is supposed merely to describe, it has also persisted in believing in the reality of the political and moral issues it addresses. When it has evoked the postmodernist impossibility of speaking in a privileged voice it has tended, not to celebrate it as Ashbery's poems do, but to fret over it and struggle against it. This much at least the mainstream shares with Morgan, Fisher and Middleton who have retained a stubbornly pre-postmodernist resistance to pure fictiveness, and have persisted with a modernist anxiety over the boundaries of knowledge, with a modernist seriousness – even, at times, earnestness – about their explorations of the fragmentariness of being.

In mainstream poetry, however, there has been a tendency not so much to resist self-reflexive fictiveness as to incorporate it and deploy it as a technique alongside others. The stylistic "mélange" I referred to, though, is not mere eclecticism – it reflects a genuine concern to oppose single-minded visions of experience with a self-conscious emphasis on diversity and mutability. Much of the impetus for this is political, and arises from a post-Movement sensibility in British poetry which arises from cultural polyphony: where the Movement poetic assumed that writers and readers were white, English middle-class males, contemporary poetry is acutely aware of voices that insist on their differences from that model and draw attention to their class, gender, nationality or race. One of the most conspicuous characteristics of contemporary poetry, as a result, is the colloquial vividness and variety of its language, and this is not merely a question of mannerism but of something substantial and important, for

> According to Bakhtin, each social group – each class, profession, generation, religion, region – has its own characteristic way of speaking, its own dialect. Each dialect reflects and embodies a set of values and a sense of shared experience. Because no two