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THE OXFORD COMPANION TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY

IAN HAMILTON

POETRY/REFERENCE

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The author of several books of poetry, **Ian Hamilton** is also a well-known biographer whose subjects have included Robert Lowell and J. D. Salinger. *Keepers of the Flame*, a collection of his literary criticism, was published in 1992.

Cover illustration by Zita Asbaghi

Oxford Paperbacks
Oxford University Press
U.S. $16.95

90000
9 780192 800428
ISBN 0-19-280042-6

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The Oxford Companion to

Twentieth-Century Poetry in English

The author of two books of verse, Ian Hamilton has written biographies (of Robert Lowell and J. D. Salinger) and literary criticism: his *Keepers of the Flame* appeared in 1992 and *Walking Possession*, a collection of essays and reviews, was published in 1994. From 1962 to 1979 he edited *The Review* and *The New Review* and for three years, from 1984, he presented BBC TV's *Bookmark* series.

Introduction

This *Companion* is offered both as a reference work and as a history, a map of modern poetry in English. It may be thought that the territory has already been well mapped, in anthologies and textbooks, but I can think of no other single-volume publication that runs from 1900 to the present day and covers topics, movements, magazines, and genres as well as individual poets, dead and alive.

Over the five years that I have worked on the *Companion* I have more than once paused to remind myself how speedily such maps can change, how fashions rise and dive. Imagine a similar compilation put together in, say, 1950. Dylan Thomas would have had more space than he gets here, and so too would Nicholas Moore, Karl Shapiro, Sidney Keyes, and other big-name figures of that time. Surrealism would have bulked larger, and there would have been a more tender deference to periodicals like *Poetry Quarterly* and *Poetry London*. The precise contours would of course have depended on who had done the mapping, but the general shape would surely have reflected the epoch's taste for the florid and religiose, its lack of any real interest in technique, its suspicion that the political poets of the 1930s had somewhat let the side down, and so on.

Ten years later, the map would have changed again, with Auden and Empson restored to favour. We would note a new respect for the output of the American academies and for those writers of the 1940s who had kept their wits about them and not turned to God, or Jung. Overall, there would have been more brainiess than ecstasy, more common sense than communal subconscious. In covering these bygone decades, I have tried to keep in mind some notion of how things must have seemed *then*, and to balance this against what I take to be history's subsequent or current valuation. At the same time, I have been wary of the passage-of-time school of literary judgement. It isn't true that 'if it's good, it will survive'; someone, somewhere has to keep saying that it's good—or if not good, exactly, then at least worthy of a small piece of the historical jigsaw, the map. There are poets discussed in this *Companion* who would probably not get into any 'up-to-date' anthology of modern verse. Their inclusion, though, should not be viewed as merely archivistic. Who knows how things will look in ten years' time?

Perhaps the first thing to be confessed of this 1994 *Companion* is that it comes from England (or Britain: 'England', in this introduction, should be taken to mean the United Kingdom as a whole). Forty years ago this would not have seemed like much of a confession; after all, the book is meant to be about poetry in *English*, is it not? Indeed, when I imagined a pre-1960 version of it, I automatically did the imagining in terms of poetry in England, with only parenthetical

reference to the United States. In spite of all the movable road signs, London was still the metropolis that mattered. Take it on to the mid-Sixties, though, and there is a serious effrontery in this assumption. A *Companion* done in 1965 would have needed to acknowledge Boston or New York or San Francisco—or even Liverpool, alas. Nowadays, London is but one of several capitals, and most people are agreed that 'poetry in English' can no longer be thought of in the singular.

If the *Companion* has a plot, then, it is to do with this shift from 'poetry' to 'poetries'. And in order to make sense of this shift, the plot inevitably centres on the relationship between the poetries of England and America. It tells of a courtship, a marriage, a divorce. In the first third of the century we have a lively interplay between the English and American traditions, each seeming to vitalize the other; in the middle third there is a struggle for control; the final third shows a gradual decline of interest, so that in the end even the rivalry seems to have died.

And if we look beyond England and America to the poetries of Australia, Canada, and the several other English-speaking territories covered in this book, we can see that they too have an involvement in the central romance: they have invariably felt the need to take one side or the other, however determined they have been to establish identities which they can call their own. These identities are already distinctive and describable, as I hope the *Companion*'s coverage makes clear, and can only become more so as the poets of these territories continue to explore the ways in which *their* English differs from the English of England and America. And this is to talk only of language-differences—differences of sensibility we take to be already well-declared. At the moment, it is hard to imagine the poetries of Australia, Canada, and so on, making a complete break with their Anglo-American parentage. There is a wish to make that break, and a wish not to. It is perhaps from this conflict that distinctiveness currently ensues. To which someone will no doubt retort: try telling that one to the Aborigines.

People talk about modern poetry being different from other, earlier poetry. When asked what they mean, they usually reply that it is less accessible, less disciplined in its technique: modern poets, they say, care little for their audience and are contemptuous of tradition. None of these definitions can be made to stick. 'Difficulty' is not a twentieth-century invention, nor is the wish to make innovations in technique. And as for questions of 'audience' and 'tradition', it could be argued that these are topics on which modern poets have worried themselves almost to excess.

It could further be contended that the insistency of such worries was what first marked off modern poetry from the poetry we had before. At no earlier period, it could be said, were the makers of poems required so nakedly to ask themselves: why poems? At no earlier period was the potential audience so thrillingly immense and yet (or therefore) so depressingly neglectful. At no period were the tribal bard's tribe-altering pretensions so cheerfully disdained. For a poet in, say, 1920, there was real, sometimes exquisite anguish in perceiving

what the new 'mass literacy' was likely to amount to, in terms of the survival of his art. Edmund Wilson's essay 'Is Verse a Dying Technique?' appeared in 1928. It was all very well for Eliot to extol poetry as civilization's 'highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility', but which 'civilization', exactly, did he have in mind? In his own poems, the consciousness, both powerful and delicate, is one of exclusion and defeat, as if a doctor were prohibited from tending his sick patient—with the prohibition coming from the patient.

But Eliot's cultural idealism (and Pound's too) was American in origin, and when we try to define the differentness of modern poetry this is perhaps where the investigation should begin: at the point when English poetry became Anglo-American. No earlier English poetry took much cognizance of outsiders, unless those outsiders were long dead and came from Greece or Rome. By the 1920s, though, the two most impressive and influential poet-critics in London were writing with at least one eye on their own, far-away backyards—in Massachusetts or Idaho. And from those backyards there was an answering alertness. When William Carlos Williams read *The Waste Land*, he said: 'I had to watch him carry my world with him, the fool, to the enemy.' The enemy was Europe, and 'my world' was 'the local conditions in America'—what Williams called 'the American grain'.

As Ezra Pound saw it, Williams's sense of betrayal sprang from a kind of fake primitivism, from envy and ignorance, the sort of backwardness, or backyardness, that had driven Pound to Europe in the first place. To him, Williams—or 'little Bill', as he liked to call him—was no more than a 'village cutup', the 'most bloody inarticulate animal that ever gargled'. And yet, from their opposing standpoints, both Pound and Williams dreamed of an American Renaissance. For Pound this could only be achieved by treating the United States as medieval, lagging 500 years behind the Europeans. For Williams, America was more than just a cultural condition, it was an actual place, 'a world of great beauty and ripest blossom'. It was also a 'hard, truculent, turbulent mass' that had yet to be properly, open-mindedly explored. Europe and its art had 'painted over, smeared' the mysteries of the New World. The newness of America had never been grasped or understood on its own terms by native artists because the cultural assumptions and ambitions of those artists had not actually been native. The ethnic-American poetries that are so trumpeted today have their roots in Williams's start-afresh polemic. After all, did not Pound also mock Williams as a 'dago immigrant'? Williams's mother, he seemed to recall, came from Santo Domingo.

The quarrel between Williams's nativism and Pound's cosmopolitanism was an American quarrel, and it is chiefly in the history of American poetry that we can see its consequences acted out: in the proudly reactionary attitudinizing of Ransom, Tate, and the Southern Agrarians; in the New Criticism on the one

hand and Black Mountain on the other; in the split between a poetry of the academy and a poetry of the soil—the Paleface versus Redskin, cooked versus raw face-offs identified by Robert Lowell—and in the continuing argument between readers and performers, page and stage. The Lowell generation was probably the last on either side of the Atlantic to believe in the continuity of the Anglo-American collaboration, and in *Life Studies* Lowell nobly tried to get the best of 'his' two worlds: to write a European poetry under the influence of William Carlos Williams. When Lowell moved from strict metres to *vers libre* he was deferring not to Pound's Europe but to Williams's America. We can, if we wish, now view *Life Studies* as even more comprehensively elegiac than it seemed in 1959.

There have of course been post-Lowell Americans who looked to England for their models, but they have been marginalized in their own culture or, as with the current New Formalists, they have been obliged to make a stately song-and-dance about their reverence for Tradition or Antiquity. And there are today British poets who cut a dash by imitating Ashbery or Merrill. But English poetry since Auden has, on the whole, tried to make Englishness a virtue. The Amis–Larkin generation chucklingly made a point of declaring its contempt for all things transatlantic—or, come to that, cross-channel. Would they have been more stylistically adventurous, more feelingful and eloquent, if the American irritant had not been there? Has 'being English' in this sense actually been shaped by the wish not to be American? The English native tradition has been kept intact and is seemingly vigorous, but is it not too arrogantly static?

Every so often the English have gone in for a bout of transatlantic yearning—A. Alvarez's 1963 anthology *The New Poetry* more or less told English poets to learn from America or die—in Pound's words—'piecemeal of a sort of emotional anaemia'—and these bouts will now and then recur. There is a solemnly programmatic strain in American letters which will always attract the undriven, the good learners. But the Americans are less impressed than they used to be by English imitations, and their critical rhetoric these days tends to be aggressively home-spun. Helen Vendler introduces her Faber (or Harvard, depending where you are) anthology of *Contemporary American Poetry* with the warning that her book 'will be able to extend its charm only to those who genuinely know the American language—by now a language separate in accent, intonation, discourse and lexicon, from English'. This is not so very different from what Auden said in 1956 when he introduced *his* Faber book of *Modern American Verse*. Speaking of the difference between American and English, Auden called it 'the most subtle difference of all and the hardest to define . . . what the secret of the difference is I cannot put my finger on', but he could tell it when he heard it, in Robinson or Frost, and did not in the least feel that it debarred him from responding to those poets' charms.

It is Vendler's tone of 'Keep off, this is now *ours*' that makes one hesitate to suggest a speedy reconciliation. Maybe American poets *need* fifty years of freedom

from English constraints. And maybe the English need a break from having to reaffirm their Englishness. We'll see. But the two languages still have much in common, much that the one can borrow from the other; so that I do now and then find myself entertaining the pious hope that this *Companion* might help to rekindle an old spark. It seems to me that each side should at least know what the other side is up to, and have some sense of the ins and outs of the historical relationship.

It will perhaps be thought that I am straining for a narrative that isn't/wasn't there. If I am, then you can blame it on *my* taste—a taste shaped in the early to mid-1960s, when the examples of Europeanized Americans like Lowell, Snodgrass, Berryman, Roethke, and Plath really did seem to be urging a renegotiated treaty. The 'enemies' in those days were twofold: in America, the academic-experimental, with its theories about breath, pulse, the open field of the white page, and sundry other elaborations or distortions of the Williams line; in England, the Beatlish ingratiators, with their student-union poetry readings, their 'disaffiliate' life-styles, and their wide-eyed insistence that 'most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people'—a cry both electrifying and anaesthetizing, as it proved. These enemies are still abroad, in various new guises, and several of them will be found to feature in this book. They have to; they are on the map.

In other words, this is not a critical anthology; nor is it a textbook. I want it to be seen as serious and useful, but I will not at all mind if it is read for fun, as a kind of documentary-entertainment. For those who like making lists, as I do, I here offer a few leads (all figures are approximate, and susceptible to computerized riposte). The *Companion* covers about 1,500 poets, 100 subjects. Of the poets, 550 are British, 550 American. Other territories break down as follows: Australia (120), Canada (110), Africa (60), Asia (40), New Zealand (35), Caribbean (30). There are about 200 women and 100 black writers. Twenty-seven poets had nervous breakdowns, fifteen committed suicide, and fifteen were/are diagnosed as alcoholic. Nineteen served time in jail, fourteen died in battle, three were murdered, one executed. Zany professions include lumberjack, tax inspector, furniture remover, carpet salesman, and policeman, but of course the vast majority of poets earn their living in universities. The most popular off-campus day-job is that of doctor or psychiatrist. Only one poet has played hockey for his country.

Ezra Pound is most often mentioned as an influence on other poets, with Auden, Yeats and Williams runners-up. Eliot is named less often than Lowell and Stevens. Rilke is the most influential foreign poet. More poets died in their seventies than at any other time of life. More lived past the age of 80 than died young (that is, before the age of 40). The most popular year to be born in was 1947, with 1934 not far behind. The dominant poetic star-sign is . . .

Enough, though. To qualify for inclusion in this *Companion*, a poet needs to have lived in the twentieth century, if only for a month or so. Thus, Stephen

Crane sneaks in but Hopkins is omitted. A poet also has to be over 30, if still living; the youngest in the book was born in 1963. He or she must have published at least one substantial collection of poetry. There may well be poets who have been unjustly overlooked, and reviewers will no doubt tell me who they are. In some instances, the poets themselves will bear the news. The choice of subjects and contributors, the allocation of space, and the general orientation of the book have been my responsibility. The opinions expressed by individual contributors are not always opinions that I share.

Attempting to cover such a vast field has of course meant soliciting lots of advice, and I am grateful to many of my contributors for their informal guidance. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the help of Douglas Dunn (on Scotland), Peter Porter (Australia), and Mario Relich (Caribbean). For the American coverage I have sought assistance from numerous quarters, and most of my US contributors have at one time or another been conscripted as editorial consultants (unofficial and unpaid): I have appreciated their forbearance even though I have not always followed their advice. On US matters I have also had useful comment from Donald Hall, Richard Howard, Mary Gray Hughes, Stanley Plumly, Mark Strand, and David Wojahn. On Commonwealth poets, Alistair Niven of the Arts Council of Great Britain gave me many useful leads, and I should also mention with gratitude Guy Butler, J. M. Coetzee, Patrick Cullinan, James Curry, C. J. Driver, Lloyd Fernando, Andrew Gurr, Dennis Lee, Alan Lawson, Leslie Monkman, John Robinson, Elizabeth Richie, and Kelwyn Sole.

The original idea for the *Companion* came from Kim Scott Walwyn of the Oxford University Press, and I am grateful to her for helping to set out the guidelines, so to speak, and for generally getting the thing moving. In the later stages, Frances Whistler and Andrew Lockett have kept it on the rails and Jeff New has made numerous mechanical—and some not-so-mechanical—adjustments; in their different ways each has saved me a few blushes, for which I am most thankful. My chief debt, though, has been to my day-to-day assistant Charis Ryder. She has managed the administration with her customary thoroughness, but her vigilance has extended to all aspects of the undertaking so that she has been, in effect, co-editor.

Ian Hamilton