

On the Circuit

The Profession of Poetry in England and America

MARK FORD

I sometimes wonder if the current differences between British and American poetry are still not pretty much those Whitman defined, in distinguishing himself from Tennyson, in one of the anonymous reviews he wrote to promote the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

Poetry, to Tennyson and his British and American élèves, is a gentleman of the first degree, boating, fishing, and shooting genteelly through nature, admiring the ladies, and talking to them, in company, with that elaborate half-choked deference that is to be made up by the terrible license of men among themselves.... The models are the same both to the poet and the par-lors. Both have the same supercilious elegance, both love the reminiscences which extol caste, both agree on the topics proper for mention and discussion, both hold the same undertone of church and state, both have the same languishing melancholy and irony, both indulge largely in persiflage...both accept the love depicted in romances as the great business of a life or a poem, both seem unconscious of the mighty truths of eternity and immortality, and both devour themselves in solitary lassitude.¹

Whitman then opposes his own new kind of poetry to that of Tennyson:

He [i.e., Whitman] never presents for perusal a poem ready-made on the old models, an ending when you come to the end of it; but every sentence and every passage tells of an interior not always seen, and exudes an impalpable something which sticks to him that reads, and pervades and provokes him to tread the half-invisible road where the poet, like an apparition, is striding fearlessly before.²

Certainly, the work of, say, Philip Larkin (“half-choked deference...reminiscences which extol caste...languishing melancholy and irony”) and John Ashbery (“an interior not always seen...an impalpable something which sticks to him that reads”) could be compared in rather similar terms. The standard division, at any rate, is still between a tradition that values the empirical, social, ironic, and formal, and one that strides fearlessly into a future of innovative methods and idioms. Al Alvarez famously complained in 1962 of the “gentility principle” which prevents British poetry from exploring what Whitman calls “the mighty truths of eternity and immortality.” He suggested we should learn how to deal with such matters from the Americans.

To an extent we have: British poetry of the last 75 years has been greatly influenced by American poetry. American poetry, on the other hand, has rather prided itself on its difference from what is being, or has been, written on the other side of the Atlantic. I have recently co-edited (with the British academic Steve Clark) a collection of critical essays on exactly this topic (*Something We Have That They Don't: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925*). Apart from a piece by Bonnie Costello about the influence of W. H. Auden (who became an American citizen in 1945) on Elizabeth Bishop, all the essays deal with the impact of American poets on their British counterparts: that of Yvor Winters on Thom Gunn, Allen Tate on Geoffrey Hill, John Ashbery on Lee Harwood, Robert Lowell on Michael Hofmann.

The reader is at this point bound to be thinking of numerous counter-examples: How about Basil Bunting's influence on August Kleinzahler, or Tom Raworth's on the Language poets, or Philip Larkin's on the New Formalists? Certainly essays could be written on such topics. My general sense, however, is that literary history has placed contemporary British poets in a somewhat uncomfortable fork; either they ignore developments in American poetry, as Larkin most notably did, and risk seeming narrow-minded, outdated, and provincial; or they attempt to incorporate American innovations, and risk seeming like representatives of a conquered nation paying awkward, imitative homage to the culture of their conquerors.

There is not time here to go into the relationship between poetry and empire, but I think the overall historical context of the shifting of power from Britain to America is crucial. One index, for instance, of the success of a British or Irish poet is if he or she gets a job offer to teach creative writing in an American university. It was Auden who first earned his keep teaching and reading “on the circuit,” to borrow the title of his poem on the subject, which concludes:

Another morning comes; I see,
Dwindling below me on the plane,
The roofs of one more audience
I shall not see again.

God bless the lot of them, although
I don't remember which was which:
God bless the U.S.A, so large,
So friendly, and so rich.³

Over here [in England], poetry is about as happening as croquet or lacrosse....

In his wake have followed Thom Gunn, Donald Davie, Christopher Middleton, Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Michael Hofmann, Eavan Boland, Glyn Maxwell, and numerous others. I can't help quoting a squib from a letter of 1959 by Larkin, in which he ponders the fact that three of his comrades-in-arms in the Movement—Kingsley Amis, John Wain, and Robert Conquest—had landed themselves lucrative posts in American universities that year:

They are all gone into the world of light,
Kingsley and John and Bob.
I suppose in some way I can't be as bright
Not getting myself a job.

For me the shops marked BOOKS & MAGAZINES,
For me the gassy beer,
The trolley-bus at ten past nine, the Deans—
I'm staying here.

The Creative Writing industry means America has vastly more professional poets than Britain. The British still somewhat distrust the whole concept of Creative Writing, though this is changing: new courses are springing up all over the place—mainly, it must be said, because cash-strapped universities are hopeful they'll turn into cash-cows. They haven't really though, as yet, affected the British poetry scene, which remains disjointed and uninstitutionalized. Very few British universities run reading programmes. While, as far as I can tell, just about every American poet of note teaches Creative Writing in a university, British poets tend to scrape by on reviewing and radio-work, or toil in the book-trade, or inherit or marry money, or, like, say, Tom Paulin or Craig Raine or Robert Crawford or myself, have jobs teaching literature, and writing tomes of criticism, in English departments.

Over here, we tend to assume, almost without thinking about it, that American poetry is bigger and better, just as American films, the American army, and American kitchens are bigger and better. I'm not sure this is actually the case at the moment. What is undeniably true is that it is much cooler—as well as much better funded—in America than in Britain. Over here, poetry is about as happening as croquet or lacrosse, but in America, or so I got the sense in the course of a reading tour I undertook last year, poetry is hip! I read in bars, and in a Russian restaurant that served us all horseradish vodka. And this hipness wasn't the result of a rebranding exercise masterminded by some advertising executive. People genuinely seemed to like poetry—which of course they do in Britain too, but in a different kind of way....

1. Walt Whitman, "An English and American Poet" (1855), cited in *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24.

2. *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, 25.

3. W. H. Auden, "On the Circuit," in *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940).