

# Trend in contemporary british poetry by adeel salman flashcard

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TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY By Adeel Salman Knowledge of contemporary British poetry is of great importance when it comes to understanding the reigning trends of England. The 1970s saw a fair amount of polemic concerning the discontinuities of the national “ traditions,” most of it concerned with poetry, all of it vulnerable to a blunt totalizing which demonstrated the triumphant ability of “ nation” to organize literary study and judgment—as it does still, perhaps more than ever.

It remains the case twenty years later that there is a strong hint of the majority of the English poets to rediscover their ‘ Englishness’ as a poet, and at the same time the presence of the various other cultures ensures that their remains a deep variety in the creative material.

The temptation stubbornly to assert the coherence and power of national traditions is strong not only among cultural conservatives dedicated to the perpetuation of poetic practices associated with or promoting “ little-englandism” but increasingly in other, less visible communities of readers as well—and here I think especially of the small but vital communities of poets and critics dedicated to exploratory practices, where the pressures to locate indigenous varieties of Modernist and postmodernist practice are increasing.

Now at this stage this would be notable that the English poetry of the present day had to come a long way before it achieved its present mould. It includes the evolution of thought process from the likes of Yeats and Eliot and on to Auden, Dylan Thomas, Philip Larkin and finally to the present day poets like Andrew Zawacki, Brian Patten etc. The poetry of the present day England is one that has many voices to it. There are various ethnicities,

cultures and nationalities involved in shaping the face of the contemporary British poetry.

But a walk down the memory lane and we find that the early poetry of the century acted as a melting pot to shape the face of the present day trend of the poetry scene. Since 1945 British poetry has moved steadily from what many regard as twentieth century parochial to a twenty-first century international. In the space of little more than fifty years the insular, clear verse of mainland English Britain has changed from being a centralist and predominantly male, seemingly academic practice to become a multi-hued, post-modern, cultural entertainment, available to all.

Some observers see this as a liberating. Others regard it as more of a descent into vernacular sprawl. But, as ever, reality cannot be so readily defined. When the war ended the new poetry which emerged still bore traces of the measured and uneventful thirties verse that had gone before it. Poets of what became known as the neo-Romantic movement, Vernon Watkins (1906-1967), W. S. Graham (1918-1986), Patricia Beer (1919- ), George Barker (1913-1991) and John Heath-Stubbs (1918- ) and others, wrote as if the British world had not changed irrevocably.

The influence of pre-war founder figures W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), T. S. Eliot (1888 – 1965), Edwin Muir (1887-1959), Louis MacNeice (1907-1963), W. H. Auden (1907-1973), and Robert Graves (1895-1985) remained strong. The modernists David Jones (1895-1974) and Basil Bunting (1900-1985), with Hugh MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve – 1892-1978) in Scotland, stayed outsider

forces. In Wales the Thomases, Dylan (1914-1953) and R. S. (1913-2000), made great marks on the map. But the poetry was not yet a true product of its times.

The reaction came in the early fifties, and by the time Dylan Thomas died in 1953, The Movement as the new tendency was called had obtained a coherence. The work of its poets nurtured rationality, was inhospitable to myth, was conversationally pitched (although lacking the speech rhythms of American counterparts like William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and was deliberately formal and clear. Movement poets opposed modernism and had little truck with international influences. They regarded themselves as a direct continuation of mainstream English tradition.

There were few sparks and much temperate, slow reflection. Members, yoked together somewhat artificially, have not, however, all remained true to their first principles. Thom Gunn (1929-) and Donald Davie (1922-1995) went on to encompass the whole gamut of American, open field and Black Mountain writing with Gunn using syllabic meters and Davie becoming an interpreter of Pound. But at the centre a tight stiff-lipped Englishness glowed in the work of Kingsley Amis (1922-1995) John Wain (1925-1994), Philip Larkin (1922 – 1985), D. J.

Enright (1920-), and Elizabeth Jennings (1926-). But on the fringes things were different. The Movement had its significant outsiders. Stevie Smith (1902-1971) was a total original who wrote “ like William Blake rewritten by Ogden Nash” (Anthony Thwaite – Poetry Today, 1996, p 28). Other poets,

less hostile to romanticism, were also steadily making their mark – Jon Silkin (1930-1998), Sylvia Plath (1932 – 1963), and two of Britain’s greatest twentieth-century poets, Geoffrey Hill (1932 – ) and Ted Hughes (1930 – 1998), all appeared during the formal English fifties.

Hughes, the gritty Yorkshire Poet Laureate engaged the primordial struggle and won. Hill’s dense, formidable, poetry became, for some, the highest achievement of late twentieth-century English verse. As the fifties and sixties rolled over it was evident that the explosion was around the corner. After a brief dalliance with jazz and stage performances, British poetry took its vital left turn. Across the western world cultural values were shifting. The old order, knocked back by two world wars and the fall of empires, was finally teetering.

In America the Beat Generation, who valued spirituality over formality and freedom over regulation, carried the torch. Here – starting with Mike Horovitz’s celebrated Albert Hall poetry reading of 1965 – the Underground became, to some, the way on. Valuing open forms and producing an anti-hierarchical, anti-war protest poetry the Underground thumbed its nose at centralist values and took its own little mag, alternative route to the people. A poetry built on wild times, popular readings and independent distribution systems exploded across the UK.

Led by the Liverpool poets Adrian Henri (1932- 2001), Roger McGough (1937-) and Brian Patten (1946-) on the back of the Beatles, and aided by Adrian Mitchell (1932-), Jeff Nuttall (1933-), Tom Pickard (1946-) and others,

Underground poetry became verse's acceptable popular face. Poetry was removing itself from its male-dominated and often academic metropolitan centers. Mike Horovitz's Penguin anthology of the period, 'Children of Albion', sold by the cart load. Not that the Underground was poetry's only route forward.

A British dimension to the world-wide concrete poetry movement appeared in the sixties work of Scottish poets Iain Hamilton Finlay (1925-) and Edwin Morgan (1920-), the Dominican monk Dom Sylvester Houedard (1925-1992) artists Tom Phillips (1937-) and John Furnival (1933-), as well as sound and found poets such as Bob Cobbing (1920-), Peter Mayer (1933-) and the London-resident French master Henri Chopin (1922-). These "experimental" poets and their followers (Peter Finch (1947-), Tom Leonard (1944-), Paula Claire (1945-) allied themselves with the Underground in their assault on the establishment. The ousting of the mainstream from the august London Poetry Society during the early seventies was a classic example of the new overwriting the old. The Poetry Review, the UK's longest-lived poetry journal (founded 1908) and an unstinting supporter of established values was taken over by Eric Mottram (1924-1995), a fervent supporter of expanded consciousness and alternative verse.

In the eastern counties, loosely centered around the magazine Grosseteste Review, a group of poets, most of them attached to university English departments and enamoured of American models found themselves constituting what became known as the Cambridge School, poetry united by its non-metropolitan axis and its foregrounding of language over discourse.

Andrew Crozier (1943-), John James (1939-), Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1947-1975), Douglas Oliver (1937-2000), John Riley (1937-1978), J. H. Prynne (1936-), and Peter Riley (1940-) were some of the leading practitioners.

Outside these ‘lunatic fringes’, as they were derisively referred to by poets adhering to the traditional centre, the English mainstream continued, almost as if nothing else was going on. New poets, many based well away from London, began to add a regional veneer to the UK’s Georgian gentility. Tony Harrison’s (1937-) hard-edged northern realism was supplemented by Douglas Dunn’s (1942-) well-wrought, working-class observations from Hull. As the seventies turned to the eighties the experimenters became the neo-modernists.

Modernism’s apparent sterility did not prevent the emergence of a whole new tranche of writers ploughing the furrow initiated by Basil Bunting (1900-1985) and David Jones (1895-1974). Allen Fisher (1944-), Denise Riley (1948-), Barry MacSweeney (1948-2000), Lee Harwood (1939-), Chris Torrance (1941-), Peter Didsbury (1946-) and others, often published by the Ferry and Fulcrum Presses, showed that British poetry was never to fall back on having simply one trick. In reaction, inevitably, the Empire struck back.

In 1982 mainstream neo-Georgian Andrew Motion (1952-) (later to become one of Britain’s greatest successes as Poet Laureate, succeeding Ted Hughes in the role in 1998) and Blake Morrison (1950-) produced the Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry, an anthology which makes its point more by

who it left out than who went in. Pop poetry may have been doing well in the clubs while neo-modernists filled the small presses yet here was proof that formalism, structure, traditional meaning and outright clarity were not qualities that had left these lands.

The expected major voices of Seamus Heaney (1939-), Tony Harrison and Douglas Dunn were joined, among others, by Hugo Williams (1942-), Michael Longley (1939-), Tom Paulin (1949-), Anne Stevenson (1933-) Fleur Adcock (1934-), James Fenton (1949-), Carol Rumens (1943-), Craig Raine (1944-) and Christopher Reid (1950-). These final pair also briefly had fame when they invented the Martian school of overblown metaphor. The centre once more held, although Larkin could not see what it was that glued them together. Steady immigration to the UK over a long period was by the eighties affecting its literature.

Immigrants like Linton Kwesi Johnson (1952-) drove in new, anti-authoritarian values, made non-standard orthography acceptable and, by allying himself with black music, produced a poetry that, in Britain, was pretty much like nothing else. Style and content were matched in importance by delivery. Acceptability by academic institutions came well down the list. British black writing's best-known early exponent, James Berry (1924-), edited the first anthology. The movement grew to include many, emerging, second-generation black Britons as well as more who had been resident here for a considerable time.



Poets such as Benjamin Zephaniah (1958-), John Agard (1949-), Grace Nichols (1950-), Jackie Kay (1961-), Jean 'Binta' Breeze (1956-), and others readily crossed the racial divide by producing a verse whose values proved utterly beguiling to those, to use Norman Mailer's term, white Negroes who disliked prejudice, authority and the police almost as much as the British Caribbean Blacks. British Asian poetry, extant but minimal, has hitherto fared much worse. Continued assaults on the citadel of centralist tradition led, by early nineties, to somewhat of a poetry boom.

The media, whipping the storm, suggested that poetry might be the new rock'n'roll. Pop stars began to admit to liking it with the odd one or two to actually writing it. The trend of allying verse with songwriting set by Bob Dylan continued. The new poets of the period ranged from the many-talented and formally experimental Peter Reading (1946-) to acceptable neo-traditionalists such as David Constantine (1944-) Selima Hill (1945-), Kit Wright (1944-), Bernard O'Donahue (1945-), Sean O'Brien (1952-), Michael Donaghy (1954-), Michael Hoffman (1957-), Carol Ann Duffy (1955-), Simon Armitage (1963-), and Don Patterson (1963-).

The culture was becoming plural. For the first time since the pre-war days of Dylan Thomas the Celtic fringes were on the rise. In the fifteen years since 1990 being an Irish or a Scots poet (yet curiously not a Welsh poet) has carried with it considerable advantage. British culture now values its parts more strongly than its , whole. This could be owed to the fact that the British are a tradition adhering nation. As good post-Modernists the concerns of

minorities, linguistic and sexual orientation, origin and gender have all become disproportionately significant.

Much of the early nineties mainstream stance is evident in the output of presses like Carcanet and Bloodaxe and is gathered in the controversial Michael Hulse (1955-), David Kennedy (1959-) and David Morley (1964-) anthology *The New Poetry* (1993). Controversial, perhaps, because of its diversity. The anthology has no central thrust other than its multiplicity. The *New Poetry* does not, however, contain many examples of Britain's performance poetry. During the past fifteen odd years verse has found an increasingly welcome home on the stage of clubs, pubs and bars.

Poetry delivered as entertainment, loud, in your face and, like much of the rest of our media, instantly appreciable has turned verse from an arcane art into a truly popular one. Building on the strong lead given by the Liverpool poets and their followers in the seventies John Cooper Clarke (1950-), Attila the Stockbroker (1957-), John Hegley (1953-), and others have increased public consumption of poetry on a geometric scale. Their work is dynamic, politically apposite and often delivered with considerable humour. Rarely, however, does it also succeed on the page.

The post-colonial cultures of recently politically-devolved Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales has seen poetry in those countries boom. In Scotland the influence of Hugh MacDiarmid, has been strong. Robert Garioch (1909-1980), George MacKay Brown (1921-1996), Norman MacCaig (1910-), Liz Lochhead (1947-) and others have seen their poetry find acceptance beyond their

borders. The same has happened throughout the troubles in Northern Ireland with the work of Paul Muldoon (1951-), Derek Mahon (1941-), Michael Longley (1939-), Tom Paulin and others emerging brilliantly alongside the towering presence of Seamus Heaney.

In Wales the dominant force, outside her borders, of R. S. Thomas has been followed by those of Gillian Clarke (1937-), Nigel Jenkins (1946-), Menna Elfyn (1951-), Gwyneth Lewis (1959-), Robert Minhinnick (1952-), Tony Curtis (1946-), and, more recently, Owen Sheers (1974-). Only in Scotland have there been significant formal innovators (Tom Leonard, W. N Herbert (1961-)). Wales and Northern Ireland (with the exception of Paul Muldoon) steer more traditional courses. By the turn of the millennium poetry in Britain had reached a multi-faceted stand-off.

Despite the work of editors like Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford (1959-) who have made brave attempts at uniting post-modern, post-Christian, post-war, post-Hiroshima, post-structuralist, post-devolution poetries under one pluralistic banner the many gleaming and disparate parts of British poetry do not like making a coherent whole. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales the literatures no longer find themselves overshadowed by an English big brother. The sound coming in from the centre can and is increasingly ignored. The argument between form and content remains as strong as ever.

It has been raging for a hundred years and there are no winners yet. The counter-culture may have changed name and altered its emphasis (from lifestyle to free-form experiment and back) but it remains as strong and has

as many adherents as ever. They may be no British Language poetry but there are plenty of fellow travellers. The line which runs up from Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), through D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), Philip Larkin, Sir John Betjeman (1906-1984), Douglas Dunn, Andrew Motion, and Simon Armitage continues, although it is no longer quite as central as it once was.

Minority writing (ethnic, genre, sexual orientation) has as many proponents and fans as pop writing did in the seventies. There are poets who are not just poets and have established themselves as multi faceted artists. This accounts for the influence of some many other disciplines in poetry. One such example would be Toni Harrison. He is a leading film and theatre poet. Apart from that he has also written for commercials singers as well. He has written for the National Theatre in London, the New York Metropolitan Opera and for the BBC and Channel 4 television.

He was born in Leeds, England in 1937 and was educated at Leeds Grammar School and Leeds University, where he read Classics and took a diploma in Linguistics. He became the first Northern Arts Literary Fellow (1967-8), a post that he held again in 1976-7, and he was resident dramatist at the National Theatre (1977-8). His work there included adaptations of Moliere's *The Misanthrope* and Racine's *Phaedra Britannica*. His first collection of poems, *The Loiners* (1970), was awarded the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize in 1972, and his acclaimed version of Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* (1981) won him the first European Poetry Translation Prize in 1983.

The The Gaze of the Gorgon (1992) won the Whitbread Poetry Award. In 1995 he was commissioned by The Guardian newspaper to visit Bosnia and write poems about the war. His most recent collection of poetry is Under the Clock (2005). In his poem 'The Truth' from this collection he has produced a voice that shows the taints of various notions regarding war of the different people living in England. Clearly enough even in today's world with all the mad arms race and the bug of political supremacy in the global village scenario, the hatred for war goes very strong. It goes like this, Let's make this world a better place to live

Stop to take, stop to give Love's got a power to get it done To stop the pain of a killing gun... Another resounding voice in the contemporary scene is of Brian Patten he is one of the representative poets of the group known as the Liverpool poets. The work of 'The Liverpool poets' was written to be read aloud in public, and although the poets have now developed separately, their literary outlook is still characterized by their common commitment to reviving poetry as a performance. Coming back to Patten we find that Patten's poetry achieves its effect through feelings, and this is what distinguishes him from the other two 'Liverpool poets'.

According to Linda Cookson, Patten's poetry complements that of Henri and McGough, but there is an essential difference between them in that Patten's humour is of an entirely different character from the verbal gymnastics of Henri and McGough, and is subordinated almost always to an underlying seriousness of purpose. Notably Patten's poems herald the fact that there is a shift among the poets to lay emphasis on feeling rather than style or

technique. Many of Patten's poems deal with the themes of ageing and mortality. In *Staring at the Crowd* he says, ' I saw the skeleton in everyone'.

He reflects that ' Grinning Jack' (the skeleton, symbolising death) lurks inside everyone, waiting for its moment to conquer the flesh and shed its outer covering. He points out, in a mildly ironical way, that we go through life preoccupied with our mundane existences, and our plans for the future, oblivious of the fact of ever-present invisible death, Grinning Jack, threatening to put an abrupt end to everything. But perhaps it is this characteristic of life that enables us to take an interest in the trivial aspects of daily life; otherwise we would experience the grimness of a graveyard in everything we did.

In ' *Cinders* Patten laments the death of his mother, whose ' Life was never a fairy-tale', and in *Armada* recounts his nostalgic reminiscence of childhood days spent with her. Just as a child's paper boat was blown out of reach by a gust of wind, so too was his mother ' Blown out of reach by the smallest whisper of death'. For as on a pond a child's paper boat was blown out of reach by the smallest gust of wind, so too have you been blown out of reach by the smallest whisper of death... As a performance poet Patten is more interested in pleasing his audience than in pleasing the critics.

Wary of critics, and suspicious of intellectual analysis, in *Literary Gathering* he tells of his unease among the dissectors (who ' dissect to murder'), and reveals his contempt for theoreticians of verse. The poet yearns to be anonymous, to: Breathe free of obscure ambitions and the need to explain

away any song. He aims to please only the true lovers of poetry, ordinary men. He writes ' for good people, people as huge as the world'. Thus what we find is that there is a shift from the old technical constriction of the poems and the poet lays more stress on the fact that his poem should be for the readers.

Another poet displaying similar feelings of enjoying poetry as an art free of the stress of technicalities is Tom Raworth. He says ' I write to have something that interests me to read. ' Raworth's poems show a strong essence of freedom. As if he wants to feel the poetry as he does air- free and everywhere. The diverse nature of the British community ensures the presence of the voices from other cultures also forming the structure of the contemporary British scene like the Black, Asian etc.

The black voices had a great influence on the British poetry with the like of Benjamin Zephaniah, John Agard, Jean ' Binta' Breeze etc. All of theses poets played their role in establishing a black context in the British poetry.

Noteably it is not a black vice that is encroaching upon the English poetry or vice versa, rather it is as if both are complementing each other. The black poetry is very much ' black' indeed. But it is not without its Englishness.

Displaying such elements of the black poetry we had one such voice in Amryl Johnson whose poetry mapped the gap between two cultures of the Caribbean and England.

Amryl Johnson, who has died at the age of 56, was an accomplished writer whose work, especially as a poet, was developing in original and distinctive

ways. Her early death is a loss to both contemporary British poetry and for Caribbean writing. Born in Trinidad, Her sense of an essential identity was formed by her Trinidad childhood, but after the move to London, where her adolescent and adult life was lived in a sometimes hostile cultural environment, she was never quite comfortable in either place.

Amryl confronted that hostility to her as a black woman in Britain – and the distinctive angle on British/Caribbean history it underscored – in some plain-spoken and angry early poems which appeared in her first pamphlet collection, *Shackles*. This established her reputation as an original voice at a time when there were relatively few young black voices to be heard in British literature: . . . I am Black And I am Angry My name is Midnight Without Pity  
However, her return visits to Trinidad were not always unproblematic in terms of her wish to identify with the place and its people.

The sometimes unsettling reaction of many of those people to her – her blackness there signifying less than her middle-class English accent and inevitably metropolitan attitudes – caused her some anguish. Her most recent publication, *Calling*, which was launched last year, also engages with myth and the associations of the female voice in poetry. There were plans to adapt and produce *Gorgons* as an opera or musical. Certainly Amryl came to regard performance as being an important – if not her primary – medium of communication. She had a very powerful presence on stage, but was also able to engage and enthuse an audience, to involve them in the event that was her performance. No one who ever saw her perform what she called her poem-song, *Far and High*, was left unchallenged or unmoved. Another poet



who has been a representative poet of her own style which involves free verse and humor is Wendy Cope. Wendy Cope was born in 1945 in the south of England. Both of her parents held management positions with British companies.

Cope earned a B. A. from Oxford (1966) and a diploma from the Westminster College of Education (1967). After teaching for several years at various junior schools in London, she became a freelance writer and columnist. Her *Making Cocoa* for Kingsley Amis (1986) includes a number of literary jokes and parodies in the style of some of the most notable twentieth-century poets. Asked about her work, Cope asserted, “ I dislike the term ‘ light verse’ because it is used as a way of dismissing poets who allow humor into their work.

I believe that a humorous poem can also be ‘ serious’; deeply felt and saying something that matters. ” Twenty-first century British poetry is no longer precisely English as it used to be. In fact it has redefined the word ‘ English’ in a new manner and this is because of the fact that there are various different trends in the British poetry scene. Like the world literature with which it is now firmly allied it has as many facets as the eye of a fly. Saying exactly what it is remains the problem of the moment.