

British Poetry since 1939

Twayne's English Authors Series

Kinley E. Roby, Editor

Northeastern University



TEAS 409

British Poetry since 1939

By Bruce K. Martin

Drake University

Twayne Publishers • Boston

PR502
.M33
1985

A11404 499597

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Bruce K. Martin

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Published by Twayne Publishers
A Division of G.K. Hall & Company
70 Lincoln Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02111

Book Production by Elizabeth Todesco
Book Design by Barbara Anderson

Printed on permanent/durable acid-free
paper and bound in the United States of
America.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Martin, Bruce K., 1941—
British poetry since 1939.

(Twayne's English authors series; TEAS 409)

Bibliography: p. 189

Includes index.

1. English poetry—20th century—History and criticism.

I. Title. II. Series.

PR502.M33 1985 821'.914'09
ISBN 0-8057-6900-5

85-885
Virginia Commonwealth
University Libraries

For my mother and father

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About the Author

Bruce K. Martin is professor of English and chairman of the department at Drake University, where he has taught since 1967. He received his graduate training and degrees in English at the University of Cincinnati. His scholarly interests center on British literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and on literary theory. Besides published essays on George Eliot, Thackeray, Hardy, Steinbeck, and Poe, he has written a book-length study of Philip Larkin for Twayne's English Authors Series, published in 1978.

Preface

Most American readers and poets have been taught to regard recent British poetry with condescension, if not hostility. Compared with their brilliant modernist predecessors or with their principal American contemporaries, British poets after Dylan Thomas are usually viewed as feeble and provincial. Such an attitude seems to have taken hold in the 1950s, when it became fashionable to see Britain's poetry reflecting her demise as a world power and exhibiting what A. Alvarez, in his Penguin *New Poetry* anthology (1962), termed "the gentility principle."

Yet, almost as soon as this negative view had begun to gain acceptance, a fairly steady, if quiet, protest began. Alvarez's anthology itself featured the work of those relatively few British poets said to display the acceptable form and degree of "newness" otherwise reserved by Americans. By the end of the 1960s one could find an anthologist of current British verse insisting to Americans that "There *is* a contemporary British poetry which is modern; for a while that seemed to be in doubt."¹ One could find, too, a British critic, after noting the pressure on English poets to accept a place of "demoralized inferiority" to their American counterparts, observing, "Fortunately there are not many signs, as yet, that poets are kissing this rod."² But perhaps the strongest indicator of at least the possibility of a shift of image and opinion came in 1974, with an American critic's writing a book on current British poets (Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets*) including some dismissed by Alvarez and his fellow British apologists as hopelessly stodgy, and calling for a revised account of recent British poetry.

Even so, British poetry since the death of Yeats remains largely unexplored territory for most thoughtful American readers. Sometime during the years, an interest in Auden's career after he settled in the United States gave way to an awareness of, at most, a few poems by Philip Larkin or the personality of Ted Hughes. Otherwise poetry from Britain hardly seemed to matter. Bedient's book, while perceptive and important, scarcely deals with recent British poetry beyond the relatively few figures it examines in detail.

It is in the hope of opening up this terra incognita that the following study of British poetry since 1939 has been prepared. The first section describes the situation of poetry in Britain at this period's beginning. Subsequent chapters deal in detail with varying responses to that situation, mainly through an examination of representative respondents. Throughout there has been an attempt to offer self-contained treatments of individual writers and at the same time to relate each author's career to what was happening in British poetry generally. I have tried to attend to impersonal forces, literary and nonliterary, as well as more personal factors in the shaping of poems and poetic careers during this time. The inclusion of British poets during World War II represents a special feature, as ordinarily they have been excluded from discussions of recent British poetry.

Many persons have provided help and encouragement in the preparation of this study. The Drake Graduate Research Council and the Liberal Arts College both provided financial assistance for travel to Britain. The staff of the Cowles Library at Drake, particularly the Reference Department, sought out books, articles, and bits of information vital to this study. Our department secretary, Fran Marks, endured my hideous handwriting and careless typing, to turn out a clear and useful manuscript. And my wife, Barbara, and sons, Matthew and Kirk, allowed me to do this, with no questions and no complaints even as my needs often conflicted with theirs. All of these, as well as the two to whom the book is dedicated, have my deep thanks.

Bruce K. Martin

Drake University

Acknowledgments

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Chronology

- 1939 In January W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood leave England for the United States. On 28 January W. B. Yeats dies in France. On 13 April Seamus Heaney born in County Derry, Ireland. On 1 September Germany invades Poland to begin World War II.
- 1940 Yeats, *Last Poems and Plays*.
- 1942 Alun Lewis, *Raiders' Dawn*. Roy Fuller, *The Middle of a War*.
- 1944 On 5 March Alun Lewis killed in Burma. On 9 June Keith Douglas killed in France. Roy Fuller, *A Lost Season*.
- 1945 Alun Lewis, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*.
- 1946 Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*—war experiences in North Africa. Henry Reed, *A Map of Verona*.
- 1951 Keith Douglas, *Collected Poems*.
- 1952 Donald Davie, *Purity in English Verse*—manifesto of style representative of the "Movement" viewpoint.
- 1954 On 1 October an anonymous article titled "In the Movement," describing a postwar movement in British literature, appears in the *Spectator*.
- 1955 *New Lines*, ed. Robert Conquest—contains early poems by Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, and other key figures in the Movement. Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived*.
- 1957 Roy Fuller, *Brutus's Orchard*. Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain*.
- 1959 Geoffrey Hill, *For the Unfallen*.
- 1960 Charles Tomlinson, *Seeing is Believing*.
- 1962 Roy Fuller, *Collected Poems*. *The New Poetry*, ed. A. Alvarez—its introduction attacks the "gentility" of the Movement; its poetry, by younger English and American writers—Hughes and Sylvia Plath among them—suggests an alternative direction for British verse.

BRITISH POETRY SINCE 1939

- 1963 *New Lines II*, ed. Robert Conquest—an anthology in response to Alvarez and other detractors of the Movement. *A Group Anthology*, ed. Edward Lucie-Smith and Philip Hobsbaum—suggests another postwar alternative to the Movement.
- 1964 Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings*.
- 1966 Charles Tomlinson, *American Scenes and Other Poems*. Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*. Stevie Smith, *The Frog Prince and Other Poems*. Alun Lewis, *Selected Poetry and Prose*.
- 1967 Ted Hughes, *Selected Poems, 1957–1967*. Elizabeth Jennings, *Collected Poems*.
- 1968 Geoffrey Hill, *King Log*.
- 1970 Philip Larkin, *All What Jazz*—collection of jazz reviews expressive of his antimodernist position. Ted Hughes, *Crow*.
- 1971 Geoffrey Hill, *Mercian Hymns*. Stevie Smith dies in London 7 March.
- 1972 Charles Tomlinson, *Written on Water*.
- 1974 Philip Larkin, *High Windows*.
- 1975 Seamus Heaney, *North*.
- 1976 Stevie Smith, *Collected Poems*.
- 1977 Ted Hughes, *Gaudette*.
- 1978 Keith Douglas, *Complete Poems*. Charles Tomlinson, *Selected Poems, 1951–1974*. Geoffrey Hill, *Tenebrae*.
- 1979 Elizabeth Jennings, *Selected Poems and Moments of Grace*. Seamus Heaney, *Field Work*.
- 1980 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*—essays. *Oxford Anthology of Contemporary Verse*, D. J. Enright—Movement poetics and polemics revived.
- 1982 Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems*.
- 1983 Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*—essays and articles. Ted Hughes, *River*.

Chapter One

Prologue: The British Literary Climate in 1939

While recognizing 1939 as a somewhat arbitrary dividing line within the broader history of modern British literature or the literature of the twentieth century, one must acknowledge the unusual degree to which Britain's official entry into the century's second European war signaled the end of a distinct phase of her literature. Because it can be argued that rarely have England's poets been so governed by a sense of the larger events of their time than were those writing in England immediately before World War II, it seems not at all unreasonable to view British poetry, like Britain itself or Europe as a whole, moving steadily toward 1939. The year 1939 takes on the qualities of a literary, as well as a political and social, limit to anyone looking back on the poetry dominant in England not only in the 1930s, but also in the 1920s.

With the experimental writing of the 1920s fiction and poetry approximated each other technically as perhaps never before or since. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf produced prose virtually indistinguishable from poetry, while T. S. Eliot and others composed poetic passages stylistically so near prose that in 1928 Edmund Wilson was inspired to write an essay titled "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" And although the 1930s poets partially restored traditional form, they and the novelists drew even closer in terms of concerns than had their counterparts of the 1920s.

Increasingly these writers responded to the economic and social woes of their countrymen, as the postwar slump marking the 1920s in Britain gradually gave way to worldwide depression. Britain's failure to regain prewar markets led to perennial unemployment problems, the General Strike of 1926, and a sense of hopelessness for thousands of families put permanently on the dole.

In a 1931 song Noel Coward summed up the feelings generated by the rise of fascism abroad and the severe depression at home when he asked:

of the degree to which British poets should strive to be British or should pursue more international connections would become a key issue.

Chapter Two

Poetry in Wartime: Douglas, Lewis, and Reed

The impact of World War II on England and on her culture is much more difficult to determine than that of World War I. Certainly modern mass warfare was much more imaginable in 1939 than it had been in 1914; a good deal of the Great War's horror had related to its novelty. Also, World War I had profoundly altered the tone of British writing by producing—and killing off—a talented group of distinctively wartime writers, by creating guilt and disillusionment among those who either survived or had been too young to fight, and by ultimately undermining the whole facade of moral and economic superiority that had informed the world of their Edwardian predecessors. The war shocked all British systems, but especially the cultural and intellectual order on which even the most rebellious writers had depended. Because the British never fully recovered from that shock, no later crisis could possibly match the catastrophic force of 1914–18. As Keith Douglas put it, “[H]ell cannot be let loose twice.”¹

While the novelists and poets of 1914 had scarcely written about even the possibility of England's being involved in a great European war until such involvement became reality—having been accustomed, like all other Englishmen, by a century of noninvolvement to regard such a development as nearly impossible—most British writers of the 1930s, and especially the poets, could think of little else to write about, having been conditioned by years of disillusioned reflection on the war and its failings. Recent history contains few more pathetic illustrations of war's horrible effects on the sensitive mind than that of Ivor Gurney, a shell-shocked contemporary of Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, who, refusing to believe that the war had ended, continued to write war poems until his death in the late 1930s, when another war was, in fact, beginning. Yet Gurney represented but an extreme of the refusal, or the inability, of most of his contemporaries to let go of the earlier war. This, in

turn, caused a generation of slightly younger poets to be preoccupied with that war and its continuation in literature, and to regard their times as a "long weekend" years before historians coined the phrase.²

War and the British Literary Climate

This more expectant, and ultimately more accepting, attitude toward war reflected in part a difference in the nature of the struggle against Hitler from that of 1914–18. This time war hit Britain in a way it had not since the Civil War of the seventeenth century. After several months of what American journalists dubbed the "Phoney War"—with the Germans occupied in Poland, the French settled behind their Maginot Line, and the British concentrating on blockading Germany and evacuating London—and after a disastrous British expedition to protect Norway from Nazi attack, the Germans swept across Western Europe in a remarkably short time, and presented the British with their first genuine threat of foreign invasion in 900 years.

Dunkirk, the Blitz, Churchill, "London Pride," "England's Finest Hour"—all belong to a sort of folklore surrounding the Battle of Britain. Unlike British battles of the 1914 war, this one involved the entire population: every social class, every age group, and almost every region of the nation. Not until the war was three years old had as many British soldiers died in battle as women and children at home.³ The bulk of the suffering, of course, occurred in London, where air raids became an expected nighttime event from the summer of 1940 until the following June. Compounding the death and destruction was the disruption of metropolitan life—of traffic, mail delivery, shopping, telephone service, and virtually every other facet of communication and commerce upon which a modern city depends.

Like travel and business-as-usual, the prewar culture of London, and of Britain generally, was temporarily halted by the fierce and lengthy Nazi air attack, as well as by the threat of land invasion. This situation became especially chaotic for the literary world, as publishing routines were interrupted and facilities often destroyed, and as writing became an impossibility amid heavy bombardment. Aspiring authors were further discouraged by the shutting down of channels open to them before the war, as paper restrictions put the squeeze on new book titles, and as many magazines ceased publication and it became illegal to start new ones.⁴

After recovering from the initial shock of the disorders attending the Blitz, however, the literary world adapted and began a modest development despite such hardships. For one thing, several new publications, begun before the ban went into effect in May 1940, partly filled the void created by those forced to shut down. Most significant among these were *Horizon*, edited by Cyril Connolly, and *Poetry (London)*, under the editorship of the legendary M. J. Tambimutto. Colorful and wild-looking, Tambimutto published many of the best poets of the war years and became a sort of guru to the literary subculture flourishing in the pubs of Soho as the war lengthened. Publishers found they could circumvent the ban on new magazines by disguising such publications as anthologies; thus the Penguin *New Writing* series and other similar ventures quickly became a standard medium for rising literary stars, especially poets. And, because the end of the Blitz restored an at least tolerable atmosphere for writing and created a greatly increased demand for books—a demand compounded by the loss of twenty million volumes destroyed in the Blitz⁵—Penguin's and other cheap paperback series prospered. The employment provided many writers by the British Broadcasting Corporation and by the Ministry of Information further modified the uncertainties of war that had earlier threatened their literary activities.

Not all of these developments proved entirely salutary. Most writers working for the BBC or the Information Office were demoralized by the intellectually demeaning tasks to which their talents were directed, and by the condescending attitude of bureaucrats.⁶ George Orwell's celebrated resignation from the BBC resulted from his feeling that he was "just an orange that's been trodden by a very dirty boot,"⁷ a feeling no doubt shared by many others. And, despite the rise of new periodicals and the anthology and a wartime reading public peculiarly eager for stimulating material, literature continued to work against extreme restrictions on paper. In a year when official publications consumed 100,000 tons, less than 22,000 were allotted for books of all kinds, and presumably but a small fraction of that for what could reasonably be termed literature.⁸ Nor did the quality of the new fiction and poetry printed on that meager paper allotment please many discriminating critics. Surveying five years of wartime literary activity, Cyril Connolly remarked on the irony of the government finally—after books were becoming "as bad as they are ugly"—recognizing the value of such activity: "The State now sits

by the bedside of literature like a policeman watching for a would-be suicide to recover consciousness, who will do anything for the patient except allow him the leisure, privacy and freedom from which art is produced."⁹ Given the conditions under which writers had been struggling, such a decline was hardly surprising.

Even so, much poetry was written and published during this period. While the number of fiction titles published annually fell sharply during the war's first three years, poetry production declined much less sharply and even rose after 1942.¹⁰ Obviously this was partly owing to the greater ease of dashing off a poem than a novel, especially under the trying and distracting conditions of war. Such an advantage enjoyed by the poet was compounded by paper restrictions and by the anthology vogue already described. Readers ordinarily accustomed to reading and preferring fiction to poetry probably found it decidedly more convenient to take in the shorter lyric form, thus producing a sharp, if temporary, growth in poetry's following. Whatever the reasons, there were plenty of poets and plenty of poems published in England during the war.

While the death of Yeats and the posthumous publication of his *Last Poems and Plays* (1940) had marked the end of an era, most of those established poets who remained continued to write. Eliot, of course, completed the final three of his *Four Quartets* during the war, with "Little Gidding" (1942) especially reflecting his wartime experiences in London. After publishing *Cantos* XII–LXXI in 1940, Ezra Pound spent most of the war in Italy, publishing virtually no poetry, although his confinement upon being arrested by the U.S. Army in 1944 inspired the *Pisan Cantos* (1948), generally considered some of his most humane writing. During this time Edith Sitwell modified her eccentric technique somewhat and reached a peak in reputation as a poet with such lyrics as "Still Falls the Rain," "The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age," and her "Three Poems of the Atomic Age." Relatedly, as the fervor for extreme modernism and political realism waned, the poems of such neotraditionalists as Edwin Muir and Robert Graves began to command serious critical attention. In this poetry of the war years each still relatively young member of the Auden group continued the inward journey begun in the late thirties, although some, notably Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender, troubled over past failings and errors more than did the others. None, including Auden himself, would again write such acclaimed poems as those of the 1930s.

As for Dylan Thomas, who had outshone the Auden group so dazzlingly, he devoted most of his wartime attention to scripting and directing documentaries and to widening his reputation as a teller of stories and imbibitor of drink among the literati frequenting London pubs. His writing of verse became sporadic; of the roughly two dozen "new" poems in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), his only collection since before the war, less than half were not written during 1939 or 1945. Despite so slender and uneven an output, some of the pieces of this period—"A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," "Fern Hill," and the "Vision and Prayer" series—are among Thomas's most beautiful.

Many new poets appeared during the war, and most have been forgotten by even the most eclectic anthologists. Foremost among those new writers to enjoy wide recognition, followed by rapid eclipse, were the group known as the New Apocalyptics. Claiming to have been inspired by Dylan Thomas—who quickly denied all connection with them—the Apocalyptics were hailed as leaders of "a new Romantic tendency, whose most obvious elements are love, death, an adherence to myth and an awareness of war."¹¹ Such a program—and it was proclaimed in various forms by several of the poets themselves, as well as by their enthusiastic anthologists—proved pretentious and vague, as did much of the poetry written under the New Apocalyptic banner. Of these writers John Lehmann has complained, "They only succeeded in being plaintive when they attempted to be passionate, and when they tackled larger themes their sentiments sounded inflated and insincere."¹²

Of the Apocalyptics only one, Vernon Watkins, achieved solid, permanent recognition. However, other poets of more lasting distinction—George Barker, David Gascoyne, and Kathleen Raine—began to be recognized in the early 1940s. And, while most of the distinctively "war" poets of this time failed to write poetry commanding any permanent reputation, the work of at least three merits reading even today.

Keith Douglas

Certainly no young British poet in the early 1940s projected a keener awareness of the significance and the hazards of writing at that time than did Keith Douglas, who was killed in France in 1944, at the age of twenty-four. The peculiarities of World War

from what he has come to want. The tone shifts from the lush of noonday to the jungle's cold night, as he feels increasingly alien in this "older world / Than any they predicted in the schools," despite his persistent rejection of that more modern world that has sent him there. The result is a painful uncertainty, a sense of displacement, an inability to make that final crossing. This poem reminds one of Alun Lewis's frequently expressed appreciation of E. M. Forster, as the gap between East and West proves impassable, and deeper than conscious desire.

A curious blend of the two cultures likewise marked the decision that sent Lewis back into jungle combat six months before his death, after he had been offered a chance to remain out of the war zone. Like Douglas, he chose to rejoin his unit in combat, despite being offered an instructor's position far behind the lines. Unlike Douglas, however, he broke no regulations in returning to his men, and he did so not out of bravery or particular love of adventure, but rather out of a desire to experience more, possibly death, and out of loyalty to his fellow Welsh soldiers.³⁸ Writing to his wife of this decision, he spoke of "what is instinctive and categorical in me, the need to experience."³⁹

While the artistic potential of Alun Lewis's complex personality was too rarely realized in his poetry, it appears with sufficient clarity in his best poems to earn him a place among the more striking writers of his generation.

Henry Reed

Though he spent only a few months in the British army Henry Reed wrote the most celebrated poem to come out of World War II. Readers and critics have found "Naming of Parts" sharper and more ironically focused than anything by Keith Douglas or Alun Lewis. Despite such celebrity, however, Reed has published no poems besides "Naming of Parts" and the others contained in a single collection, *A Map of Verona* (1946). A reading of that short book in its entirety reveals a development relatable to those observed in Douglas's and Lewis's writings, and to larger tendencies of British poetry in general during the 1940s.

One of Reed's recent critics, borrowing from Walter De La Mare, has described Reed as an "Ariel-dominated" poet, mostly concerned with the aesthetics and craft of poems rather than their relationship

to the life outside them, the domain of writers he terms "Prospero-dominated."⁴⁰ Certainly it is difficult to discern in the mere twenty-four poems making up *A Map of Verona* any pervasive ideology such as can be found in the writings of many other poets of the war. And certainly even the least interesting of Reed's pieces combines a delicacy of tone and prosodic caution generally absent from the work of his contemporaries in uniform writing more realistically. However, even Reed's limitations, and the variations in his writing, have ideological implications, and most of his poems betray some concern with the larger reality out of which they originated.

The contents of *A Map of Verona* can be quickly surveyed. The heading, "Preludes," comprises half of the poems. These include: a number of nondescript, vaguely romantic lyrics; a set of poems labeled "Lessons of War," of which "Naming of Parts" is the first; and a first-rate parody of T. S. Eliot titled "Chard Whitlow." Next comes a neoromantic sequence titled "The Desert." The book concludes with three somewhat longer poems based on the Tristram legend, which Reed contained under the title "Tintagel," and two based on classical subjects, "Chrysothemis" and "Philoctetes," the latter being Reed's longest single piece.

Of the dozen Preludes, the three "Lessons of the War" and the parody on Eliot are by far the strongest. The rest languish, to varying degrees, in Audenesque vagueness, as they deal with problems of love or other unspecified worries. While "Lives" may be an exception—since there Reed thoughtfully compares types of personality (the openly wild, the controllable, and the wily) to elements of nature—it improves only to a degree on the others.

The three "Lessons of the War" offer a sharp contrast to the obscurity of the remaining Preludes, as they focus on the instructing of combat troops as filtered through the mind of a young recruit. Though not rhymed and though conversational in tone, Reed's stanzas represent orderly, five-line sections, with the final line frequently operating as a quasi-refrain.

Certainly "Naming of Parts," which enjoyed a revival of attention from American anthologists during the Vietnam War, epitomizes the control, understatedness, and irony of Reed's best writing. Apparently this and the other two "Lessons" stemmed from the imitations of instructors with which Reed entertained his army friends.⁴¹ The first stanza begins straightforwardly, with the instructor's outlining the topics of the course: "To-day we have naming of parts.

Yesterday / We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning, / We shall have what to do after firing." This viewpoint is quickly undermined, however, as the poem turns briefly but significantly to nearby flowering fruit trees ("Japonica / Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens ..."). Although the stanza's final line, "And to-day we have naming of parts," reiterates the poem's initial focus, a tension has been set up, and it expands in succeeding stanzas to emphasize increasingly the gap between the lifeless, mechanical skills of warfare in which the recruit is being instructed, and the more beautiful, organic processes of nature that he can see all around him. As the poem progresses, nature occupies larger portions of each stanza, so that by the end "naming of parts" seems solely an impediment to the recruit's experiencing the beauty, force, and legitimacy of nature.

One area in which the trainee is made to feel especially estranged from natural existence is the erotic, which in "Naming of Parts" is represented by the bees "assaulting and fumbling" the flowers, but in "Judging Distances"—the second "Lesson"—becomes explicitly human. Here Reed develops his poem through a competition of pressures on the trainee's mind, as time and memory distract him from an absurd present denying him his past—just as in "Naming of Parts" it attempted to deny him his place in nature. Here, too, nature is denied, as the instructor insists on reducing landscape and life to abstraction. "[M]aps are of time, not place, so far as the army / Happens to be concerned," he tells his recruits, though by "time" he means only the perversion of expressing topography in terms of a clock's face, and though he is wholly unable to tell why the army need regard things in this way. The basic principle he lays down is that things only seem to be things, and that field reports ought to avoid unnecessary commitment to concreteness or particularity. While sheep may be "safely grazing" in the field, he warns, "[W]hatever you do, / Don't call the bleeders *sheep*."

The poem turns on the trainee's attempt to apply such principles, as repeatedly the poetry of what he observes and of the civilian viewpoint he has brought to the army intrudes on the antipoetic method the instructor would enforce. Thus, after observing houses and a couple lying together under swaying trees, the recruit quickly adjusts his account to fit the formulas of army reportage, so that "under some poplars a pair of what appear to be humans / Appear to be loving." But when he imagines his instructor's objection that

he has failed to record his distance from the human pair, he realizes fully the absurdity of the denial demanded of him, and responds that the lovers appear to have "finished" and that their distance is "about one year and a half" from him. In this he sadly recognizes how much military life has removed him from his own lovemaking and how much it threatens to remove him from any essentially human response. While this poem, like the other, shows the trainee's ultimately resisting such a threat, it suggests nevertheless the basic danger of the mental state into which warfare would fix him.

"Unarmed Combat," the third lesson, might appear the anomaly among them. Indeed, Vernon Scannell has seen here a much more affirmative stance and a much less certain irony than in the other two poems.⁴² To be sure, "Unarmed Combat" concludes with the lyric protagonist, again an army trainee, invoking courage and determination and asserting that "we must fight / Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping something alive":

so that when we meet our end,
It may be said that we tackled wherever we could,
That battle-fit we lived, and though defeated,
Not without glory fought.

His awareness of this "something" he values so highly and wishes kept alive grows out of listening to his instructor's introduction to the skills of unarmed combat; and from his own interpretation of these remarks in view of his past experience. With an extreme verbal ineptness the instructor begins by assuring the trainees that "In due course of course you will all be issued with / your proper issue," just as later he tells them to "give [the enemy] all you have, and always give them / As good as you get: it will always get you somewhere." The jargonish double-talk of these remarks, and of his reference to the "ever-important question of human balance" and the "ever-important" need for strong initial positioning, combines with a reliance on dubious or at least irrelevant logic—when, by a curious non sequitur, he urges them never to fear to tackle from behind, since "it may not be clean to do so, / But this is global war"—to suggest a character even less reliable than that of the instructors in the other two "lessons." The unwitting allusion to Lear in his concluding observation, that "the readiness is all," thus appears especially ironic.

The second half of the poem, taken up by the trainee's rumination on what he has been told, constitutes a much more profound interpretation of the instructor's comments. Reed's calculated efforts to render the instructor foolish and the more intelligent and thoughtful manner of the listener's response make it unlikely that we should see that response merely as a capitulation to the value system endorsed by the instructor. Rather, the trainee places his own construction on the principal concept and phrases he has heard, to subvert their original meaning.

The key here is the central stanzas, where he reveals his past unhappy relationships to institutions and systems, and to society generally. Having just been told that "you can tie a Jerry / Up without rope," he confesses to always having been the one tied up, to "[having] given them all I had, / Which was never as good as I got, and it got me nowhere," and to having waged global war "from the start." The skepticism of this response feeds his nominal agreement that balance and courage count most, as his balance appears the cautious weighing of ultimate implications, and his courage involves an insistent wariness toward the simplistic formulas handed him by others. "The readiness is all," he repeats after his instructor, but through him it becomes a readiness to maintain an integrated point of view and, even while serving a system such as the military, not to be absorbed by it. He thus anticipates Alan Sillitoe's young hero in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. Without such special readiness, participation in a physical triumph would spell defeat in the unarmed combat for the psyche. In this Reed's final war "lesson" is basically in keeping with the others.

While none of his other poems merit such detailed attention, they confirm the strengths of the "Lessons of the War." Reed's hilarious parody of Eliot, written when the final *Quartets* were coming out, captures the pompousness and air of false profundity into which Eliot risked falling, as it begins:

As we get older we do not get any younger.
Seasons return, and to-day I am fifty-five,
And this time last year I was fifty-four,
And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.
("Chard Whitlow")

Reed's less distinguished poems further suggest his gravitation toward dramatic characterization, a trend wholly realized in his later career as a distinguished writer of dramas and radio plays. Thus the rather lengthy sequence, "The Desert," though suffering from the weakness of obscure figurative reference, which plagues most of the Preludes, nevertheless points to an interesting progression of sickness, illusion of recovery, and disillusionment, and a semblance of final equilibrium, and it hints at Reed's potential strength in the sustained portrayal of single characters. Likewise the Tintagel poems become increasingly dramatic and concrete, as they move from the distance of narration in "Tristram," through a combination of narration and enclosed statement in individual characters in "Iseult Blaanches-mains" and "King Mark," to a contoured and particularized expression of misery in "Iseult La Belle."

The two poems on classical subjects continue this progression. "Chrysothemus" expresses Agamemnon's surviving daughter's vulnerability and determination through dramatic and poignant images and highly charged rhetoric. And in "Philoctetes" Reed develops an even more complex monologue or soliloquy, reminiscent of Tennyson's "Tithonus" and "Tiresius," as he places the disillusioned suitor of Helen on the isle of Lemnos just as he is about to be rescued after nine years' exile there. "I have changed my mind; or my mind is changed in me," Philoctetes begins, while preparing to meet his rescuers. Before doing so, however, he recalls being abandoned, describes his pain and delirium, and rehearses his decision to rejoin humanity:

I have lived too long on Lemnos, lonely and desperate,
Quarrelling with conjured demons, with the ghosts
Of the men and women with whom I learned to people
The loneliness and despair....

Reed shows, too, the exile's confusion about his future, particularly his concern for knowing whom to trust after having been by himself so long. The monologue ends with Philoctetes determined but unsure, eager but cautious, and renewed but wary.

The sympathetic power of "Philoctetes" comes from the combination of rhetorical control and dramatic complexity. While we may regret that Reed has written few poems since the publication of *A*

Map of Verona, his decision to shift his attention as a writer appears in retrospect a most logical and plausible outcome of developments evident in his poetry. Clearly he was moving toward something like drama, as his poetry increasingly came to resemble spoken words determined by the specifics of personality, time, and place. In this Reed resembles Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis, as well as many other wartime poets, for he ultimately shows a distrust of the large-scale statement, empty rhetoric, and vague romanticism that had infected English poetry during the thirties and early forties. That Reed's own solution to such a dilemma was unique makes him no less a representative figure.

Chapter Three

The Empiricist Response: Fuller and Larkin

The central tendency in the work of the leading wartime poets was toward concreteness and even fictionality in their verse, and away from the vague idealization that had been fostered, in part, by the early work of Auden and his circle. In this the soldier-poets followed the Auden group themselves, who by the late 1930s had moved toward a poetry largely concerned with particular and personal problems expressed in concrete terms, and away from larger subjects. Relatedly, the prose narrative writings of Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis—specifically *El Amein to Zem Zem* and Lewis's short fiction—and Henry Reed's gravitating to the writing of drama reflect not only these talented poets' versatility, but an uncertainty about the possibilities of poetry in their time, an uncertainty shared by many of their contemporaries and by those slightly younger poets who were to emerge after the war.

A crisis had developed in English poetry, a crisis signaled by the departure of Auden and the breakup of his circle, by the death of Yeats and the absence of any comparably commanding figure to succeed him, and by the controversy surrounding Dylan Thomas and the kinds of imitation his writing had inspired. It is scarcely surprising that the young Philip Larkin, tiring of the Yeatsian poetry he had come to write at Oxford, would turn to novel-writing in the mid-1940s and would develop a (for him) new kind of poetry only out of his frustrations in attempting additional novels and stories—or that his Oxford chums in the so-called Movement of the early 1950s, Kingsley Amis and John Wain, despite their continuing interest in writing poems, would make their marks as novelists. To write honest poetry seems to have been extraordinarily difficult for anyone who had come of age during the waning of Auden's youthful phase. Even Roy Fuller, who had been born early enough to fall under many influences besides Auden's and to publish his first collection in 1939, began to turn out novels after the war's

war's beginning, it also suggests a recognition of that question's difficulty, and its probable unanswerability.

Such events as these, as well as poems actually written by British poets since 1939, are evidence that British poetry can and will cross-examine itself periodically and will resist settling into any single mold. In the meantime new poets and new poems will appear. Larkin's joyous remark about the British propensity to sea-bathing—"Still going on, all of it, still going on!" ("To the Sea")—applies equally to British poetry. Who the prominent British poets of the next century will be—or whether a principal figure will finally emerge to take Yeats's place—there is no sense conjecturing. What seems certain, though, is that arguably the greatest poetic tradition in human history has not given out, but will continue to replenish itself in surprising and significant ways.

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