Introduction

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Scope and approach

'And Question five is, God help us, what is my definition of Poetry?' So Dylan
Thomas wrote in 1951 in response to conundrums posed by a student. Among
his answers is a reminder of 'the mystery of having been moved by words',[1] a
'mystery', not a mystification, to which subsequent pages in this volume bear
witness, and which coexists with poetry's ability to provide greater clarifica-
tion of the human condition. The poet, writes Yeats, 'is part of his own
phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible,
and by so doing a part of our creative power'.[2] The phrasing here may
be consciously on its stilts, its affirmations unashamedly ready to disconcert,
even to embarrass, but Yeats comes close to smoking out the essence of
the hold possessed by poets over their readers.

The poets discussed in this *Cambridge History of English Poetry* often exercise
ways of making 'nature . . . intelligible' that add to their readers' sense of
'creative power'. Milton using word-play, paradox and affecting rhythmic
intensity to overcome mortality in *Lycidas* as he describes his drowned fellow
poet as having 'sunk low, but mounted high, / Through the dear might of him
that walked the waves' (lines 172–3); Coleridge making personification a means
of mesmerically conveying tragic futility at the close of the reversed sonnet
'Work without Hope'; Ted Hughes inventively exploiting rhyme and line-
endings to evoke how 'a black- / Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly' in
'Wind' (lines 15–16): the three examples give a taste of how English poetry
embodies and irradiates 'creative power'.[3]

The present book is, in one of its central aspects, a robust if never simply
uncritical celebration of that 'creative power'. It provides a literary-historical
account of English poetry from Anglo-Saxon writings to the present.
Principally the *History* deals with narrative and lyric poetry and does not
include poetic drama written for the stage. Thus, Shakespeare's sonnets and

narrative poems are included, but not his plays, except briefly. However, English poetry contains many fine poems which exploit possibilities associated with drama, even though they are not intended primarily for the stage: again, there are other dramatic works, which, though intended for the stage, have ended up mainly as texts experienced through private reading. Works such as Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, therefore, as well as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*, are discussed.

Some guiding principles are at work. First, contributors have been asked to highlight the formal and aesthetic features of poetry. 'Formal and aesthetic' is meant to draw attention to the fact that this is a history of poetry, and that 'poetry' involves artistic uses of language, as, indeed, many of the poets discussed in the volume insist. One subsidiary topic running through the volume is the discussion by poets in their poems of the nature of poetry. Contributors have been asked to explore ways in which poets use form, taking that term in its widest sense to include all aspects of poetry considered as an art: uses of genres; handling of metre, structure, image, metaphor, echo and allusion; deployment of diction, idiom, ambiguity; tone and mood. Multiple threads run through the volume as a consequence. If one stays solely with the question of echoes and allusions, one might note how subtle resonances link poets as various as Pope, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Hill with Milton; how Yeats's *ottava rima* stanzas connect to and contrast with the same verse form's function in Byron; and how T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a mosaic of generic fragments and owes its power partly to the way in which it summons up, in however frustrated or ironic a manner, previous poetic styles.

Second, contributors have been asked to write in terms that are historical as well as literary, though it is *literary* history that is placed to the fore. There will be many occasions where literary history requires reference to the political and social history of the period in which poets are composing, and due attention is given to the intersection between these histories. That formal choices may reflect political, social, historical and gender preoccupations is clear.

The fifty-three chapters are centred on authors: sometimes on single authors, sometimes on authors considered as groups. The *History* departs from the practice of many literary histories[4] by singling out in a few chapters particular works at the heart of an understanding of English poetry. Sympathetic though the *History* is to the claims of the non-canonical, the purpose of the *History* is less to offer a critique of a supposedly inflexible canon than to give an overview of English poetry that is alert to continuity and

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change. Since the work is a 'history', it often considers works that many readers of poetry in their own and succeeding ages have regarded as particularly significant. But it is alive to the argument that what makes a text canonical is precisely its openness to various modes of reading, and it is aware of the fact that the notion of the 'canonical' is always shifting, always provisional. 'Literary history' is always a contentious and contested enterprise, raising questions about the validity of groupings and periodisation. The notion of 'transition', the passage from one era to another, is crucial for the *History* and is continually explored in its pages.

Above all, contributors have been asked to write with first-hand consideration and depth. The watchword for contributors and the volume has been 'attention': sustained, unremitting attention to the implications and meanings of verbal structures artistically shaped by poets. The poems themselves have been allowed to generate through their language appropriate frames of reference. So the *History* has much sympathy with Paul Muldoon's dual view that 'We know that no poem may be read as a completely discrete construct ... but we also know that part of the function of the poem is to present a construct that is *relatively* free-standing, to create a *relatively* squared-off stand of timber on the plain.'[5] Contributors have been invited to demonstrate, implicitly or explicitly, knowledge of relevant reception history, but never at the expense of independent response.

The *History* is a history of 'English' rather than 'British' or 'Irish' poetry: it focuses on poets writing in English in the political structure currently termed the United Kingdom, though there has been some fluidity here and a recognition of the shifting political definitions of 'English' and 'British' over the centuries. The *History* certainly makes no attempt to cover all poetry written in English. In practice, purity of principle has been hard to follow and may not, for good reasons, be wholly desirable. Thus, there is a chapter on Imagism in which the American poet Ezra Pound features, because of his centrality to English poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; a similar reason explains the inclusion of Sylvia Plath.

An evident principle of structure is chronological, tracking the time-line that runs from *Beowulf* through to, say, Alice Oswald. Closely linked with that principle is a geographical emphasis, stronger in some chapters than others, that attends to the importance of place and space in English poetry: the regionality of 'English' poetry features throughout the volume, including questions thrown up by what John Kerrigan calls 'the current devolutionary process'.[6]

Contents: brief description

Chapter 1 describes major trends and achievements in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The legacy of Anglo-Saxon poetry (in, for example, Pound's *Cantos*, the early work of Auden or Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*) indicates its continuing relevance, and anticipates the volume's emphasis on patterns of continuity and discontinuity. Chapter 2 discusses the productions of the *Gawain*-poet, especially *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in relation to the Alliterative Revival of the late fourteenth century, the significance of courtly poetry and the awareness and use of French Arthurian romances. Chapter 3 maps and contextualises poetry written around and during the reign of Richard II (1377–99), an era which has been central to the development of subsequent English poetry. Chapter 4 is the first chapter to explore a single work, here *Piers Plowman*, a major poem of medieval English literature. Chapter 5 also explores in detail individual works, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, two of the finest poems in the language. Chapter 6 discusses the literary phenomenon of medieval literature in Scotland, literature written in Scots English in the Lowlands of Scotland.

Chapter 7 considers major poets of the sixteenth century, writing during the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47), and studies, in particular, the work of three poets: Skelton, Wyatt and Surrey. Chapter 8 concentrates on the literary productions of Spenser, especially *The Faerie Queene*. Chapter 9 takes up the story of the sonnet begun in chapter 7, focusing principally on sonnet sequences by Sidney and Shakespeare, though it also consider other major Elizabethan sonnet-writers (especially Spenser and Drayton) and explores lyrics written by poets such as Campion. Chapter 10 examines the narrative verse of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Chapter 11 considers the major poets writing in the first part of the seventeenth century, during the reign of James I (1603–25): John Donne and Ben Jonson. Discussion of the work of Wroth, Lanyer, Drummond, Herrick, Carew and King is also offered. The basis for the chapter division between this and the following chapter is essentially chronological (though Herbert is placed in the next chapter because of his influence on Vaughan). Chapter 12 examines the poetry of other major lyric poets of the seventeenth century, focusing, in particular, on religious poetry produced in the period. Figures considered include Herbert, Vaughan, Cowley, Marvell, Crashaw and Philips. Chapters 13 and 14 are devoted to the career of one of the greatest poets in the language, Milton. The first considers his shorter poems, the second *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*.

Chapter 15 addresses the generation of poets associated with the period following the Restoration of Charles II, especially Dryden, Behn and others. Chapter 16 is given over to readings of three major poems by Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther*, to allow the contributor to dwell more fully than was possible in chapter 15 on Dryden's poetic achievement as exemplified by three of his major works. Chapter 17 focuses on Swift; chapter 18 on Pope and Samuel Johnson; chapter 19 on eighteenth-century women poets; chapter 20 on the longer eighteenth-century poem (by Akenside, Thomson, Young, Cowper and others); and chapter 21 on eighteenth-century lyric poetry (written by such authors as Gray, Collins, Smart, Joseph Warton, Thomas Warton, Macpherson, Chatterton and Burns).

Chapter 22 offers an overview of English Romantic poetry. Chapter 23 looks at Blake's major lyric poems, especially in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and his prophetic poems. Chapter 24 studies shorter poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, especially *Lyrical Ballads*. Chapter 25 focuses on Wordsworth's two major long poems, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. Chapter 26 examines the work of Hunt, Byron and Moore, and chapter 27 looks at Byron's *Don Juan*, one of the greatest (and funniest) long poems in the language. Chapter 28 analyses the work of Shelley and Keats. Chapter 29 looks at 'third-generation Romantic poetry', in particular the poetry of Beddoes, Clare, Darley, Hemans and Landon. Chapter 30 looks more specifically at poetry by Romantic-era women poets.

Chapter 31 provides an overview of Victorian poetry, before subsequent chapters address the work of individual poets (32 on Tennyson, 33 on Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 34 on Emily Brontë, Arnold and Clough, 35 on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Swinburne and 36 on Christina Rossetti and Hopkins). Chapter 37 looks at later Victorian poets (including James Thomson, Symons, Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Housman) and chapter 38 looks at a further grouping of such poets (including Davidson, Kipling, 'Michael Field' [Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Cooper], Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Augusta Webster and May Kendall).

Chapter 39 supplies an overview of Modernist and Modern poetry; chapter 40 explores the work of Hardy and Mew. Chapter 41 is on Yeats, chapter 42 is on Imagism and chapter 43 is on T. S. Eliot. Chapter 44 looks at the achievement of First World War poets, including Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon, while chapter 45 explores the thirties poetry produced by Auden, Day Lewis, MacNeice and Spender. Chapter 46 investigates the work of Dylan Thomas and other poets of the 1940s.

Consideration of poetry after 1945 begins with a chapter (47) on Larkin and the Movement, which is followed by a discussion of three twentieth-century women poets – Riding, Stevie Smith and Plath (chapter 48) – and by accounts of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney (49), Geoffrey Hill (50), poets from Northern Ireland (Mahon, Muldoon, McGuckian and Carson) and from the Republic of Ireland (Boland and others) (51), and by two chapters on poetry since 1980 (52 and 53).

Inevitably there will be lacunae, but the volume as a whole is intended to stimulate renewed interest in the history of English poetry, to narrate its developments and changes, to trace and explore its linguistic, generic and formal achievements and transformations and to offer illuminating accounts of a multitude of significant poems and poets.

Notes

1. Dylan Thomas, 'Notes on the Art of Poetry', in James Scully (ed.), *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (London: Fontana, 1966), pp. 201, 202.
2. 'A General Introduction for My Work', *The Oxford Authors: W. B. Yeats*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 379.
3. These poems are quoted from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, seventh edition, general ed. M. H. Abrams, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 2000).
4. Valuable predecessors of the present volume include George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1923) and Herbert Grierson and J. C. Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, in association with Chatto and Windus, 1962). Many notable anthologies of English poetry have also undoubtedly shaped the editorial decisions informing this book.
5. Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures in Poetry* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 171.
6. John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1717* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 2.