

NOTES & COMMENTS

“Meagrely Provided”: a response to Don Paterson

The following is a rejoinder to Don Paterson’s corrosive introduction to New British Poetry, an anthology of British poets born after 1945 released on April Fools Day 2004 by Graywolf Press. Given Graywolf’s stunning publicity budget (\$30,000 per book, according to an article by Michael Scharf in the 15 April 2004 Publisher’s Weekly), we can expect more than a few reviews that take Paterson’s introduction as gospel and present this book as “The only definitive anthology of contemporary British poetry available in the United States” (as the book’s backside has it, ignoring Keith Tuma’s Oxford Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry which is widely available in this country). One of our correspondents in London, the American poet and critic Andrea Brady, parses Paterson’s polemic and presents it for what it is.

Don Paterson has done “Postmodernist” poetry a great service. By introducing another smart anthology* of Britain’s poetic “Mainstream” with a torrid assault on what he labels, witlessly, the “Postmoderns,” Paterson has actually undermined the claim of the Mainstream to any cultural validity other than that based on sales—a measure whose nullity he himself exposes. Paterson excuses the violence of his “partisan” account by saying that the Postmoderns “have gone to great lengths to present themselves as a distinct tribe”; their tactics of identification include, principally, “the systematic denigration of those unlike themselves.” Coming half way into the most hateful digression on experimental poetry recently bundled into print, this is, to say the least, ironic.

To describe Paterson’s introduction as “hateful” is not an exaggeration. His enemies are “derelict,” “bizarre,” “neurotic,” “odd,” “effortlessly easy,” “worthless,” “self-absorbed,” “foaming at the mouth,” acting on “linguistic whim,” driven by a “plan” for “evolutionary succession, not cohabitation.” Their “emotional palette” is “meagrely provided,” they are “capable of nothing more than a monotone angst, an effete and etiolated aestheticism, and a kind of joyless wordplay that somehow passes, in their country, for wit.” By contrast “Mainstream” poets are “honest,” “courteous,” in “open, complex and ongoing dialogue with the whole of the English lyric tradition.” They

* *New British Poetry*, Don Paterson & Charles Simic, eds. (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2004)

are in an “extremely vulnerable situation,” because they take “braver” risks and achieve “*real* originality.” The Mainstream is vulnerable, apparently, to being swamped by the Postmoderns, who rule the academy; “If the Mainstream is to survive,” he says, they must re-enlist those readers “from whom the times have conspired to divide them.” On Paterson’s planet, the scary Postmoderns, with their exoskeletons of expressionist system and long academic antennae, are controlling the resources, brainwashing the kids, and conspiring with machine-like efficiency to exterminate the poor honest artisans of the Mainstream.

This is so fanatical a diagnosis that all readers might as well ignore it. We could ask why the editors of *Graywolf* cleared it for publication, and what Charles Simic was doing collaborating with such rabidity. But why tangle with such unsubstantiated and feckless rubbish when Paterson incriminates himself very capably? In contrast to the leftist political commitments he declares elsewhere, in this essay he struts around like poetry’s Neo-conservative chief of staff, reinforcing the interests of the poetic establishment through hysterical conjurations of threats. “This essay,” he says in the first paragraph, is an attempt “to discuss the threat currently presented by the Postmoderns and their general ubiquity.” Later, he uses a misleading spatial metaphor for this ubiquity, at the same time contradicting the realities of publishing, marketing, distribution, and sales, all of which enclose and delimit the audience for poetry generally but experimental practices in particular. The “Mainstream” is “shaped and narrowed,” “narrowed to a fairly furious and articulate torrent” by the “closing banks” of New Formalism on one side, Postmodernism on the other. But the threat under discussion seems to be the occupation by the Postmoderns not of resources, but of the academic status which could validate—though never encourage—middle-class consumption of poetry. Paterson’s confusion, in part, is due to his desires for *both* bourgeois commercial success and the endorsement of the elite. Unfortunately, because he lacks the means to critique class structure and consumption, he can’t find the knife to cut his way out of the nets of his own experience of displacement and desire, and is left floundering in a mess of contradictions.

The Postmoderns, for example, “have now attained considerable academic influence in the UK.” But of the 36 poets included in this anthology, at least 20 are teaching (or have taught) at universities: Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy (both Manchester Metropolitan), Fred D’Aguiar (University of Miami), Peter Didsbury (taught at Hull for eight years), Paul Farley and W. N. Herbert (both Lancaster), James Fenton (Professor of Poetry at Oxford), Mark Ford (University College London), Lavinia Greenlaw (Goldsmiths College, University of London), Michael Hofmann (University of Florida, Gainesville), Glyn Maxwell (lately Princeton), Andrew Motion (UEA

and lately at Royal Holloway, University of London), Sean O'Brien (Sheffield Hallam), Ruth Padel (in the past, at Cambridge, Oxford, and Birkbeck), Anne Rouse (previously Royal Literary Fellow at Glasgow), and Jo Shapcott (Newcastle and Oxford Brookes). John Burnside, Robert Crawford, Kathleen Jamie, and Paterson himself are all at St Andrews.

Leaving the reader wondering if we shouldn't set up a new CampusWatch website, where students can denounce their deviant Postmodernist lecturers, Paterson then denies the Postmodernists' "influence"—for "besides the captive audience of their students, the Postmodernists only have other Postmodernists as readers," and "sell few books to the general public." So in what way are they ubiquitous? Paterson himself is interested in "the poetry actually *read* in the UK"; "all the poets collected here have been drawn from the set of British poets who still sell books to a general—i.e., non-practising and non-academic—readership." In fact, both he and Simic explain that the poets represented in their anthology came later to the attention of American readers than the Irish who made themselves "popular" (Simic says) by having "books published in this country" and making "themselves even more familiar to readers by giving numerous readings." Popularity is a consequence of marketing and self-promotion. For Paterson, Irish poets have also "benefited from that country's more outward-looking internationalism." This is a mysterious observation; it is unclear if he means Ireland's internationalism in arts or politics. Whatever that internationalism, in its varying degrees of outward-lookingness, may be, both Paterson and Simic confirm that they are seeking to promote a version of British poetry that *accommodates*.

Simic looked for poetry whose style wouldn't be "too familiar to North American readers" and whose allusions wouldn't be "incomprehensible to them." The editors' praise of John Ash's "genuinely transatlantic voice" is paradigmatic. American readers should not be forcefully estranged from their own experiences by this poetry, but it should still retain a vague whiff of foreignness. At the intersection of these two ultrafine crosshairs we might expect to find a poetry which accommodates not only the mildest reader, but also a mirror of the ideological constraints which govern the "special relationship" Paterson evokes in his last sentence. When Simic writes that "We" Americans "are wary of traditions, closed intellectual systems, and ideas that do not come from experience," that "living with contradictions is our national specialty," that we draw on "Emerson's limitless faith in the power of the individual to make a new beginning, reinventing everything," he is promoting a national myth whose most significant and dangerous relevances are not to poetry but to politics. But because it erases the material conditions of the production, publication, and distribution of poetry from its ragged synopsis of national cultures—viz. Paterson's opening sentence, "British poetry is different from American poetry," period—this anthology itself

defuses the critique of those myths in which some of its poets are actually engaged.

Consequently, Paterson and Simic select individual poems which are appropriate to a famished definition of poetry. In the exuberant notes to the poets, Paterson and Simic alert us to the presence of “small and delightfully calculated surprises, surreal excursions”; poems “rendering the quotidian detail in a miraculous light,” poets with an “eye and ear for the surreal,” characters “abandoned in the most bizarre situations.” This anthology is predisposed to poetry which exhibits obvious “technique” in its use of regular meters, meek in its politics, pithy, witty, accommodating. Simon Armitage drops hints about sexism in a monologue instructing me on how to top up brake fluid. It’s hardly a poem I’ll return to time and again, puzzling out the truth of my own life-experience, feeling bound happily into a community of sense by the use of the northern epithet “love,” or estranged by the brand name “Swarfega.” As for Paterson’s own poems, “Imperial” ends with the most bathetic couplet on that tender life-experience of losing one’s virginity you’ll ever read in the *Chicago Review*: “the night we lay down on the flag of surrender / and woke on the flag of Japan.” Poetry is that language art which employs a tamed or domesticated version of the surreal, in order to make us feel slightly estranged from something we recognize in our own lives. It is the function of poetry, Paterson says, to “shock the reader into a brief moment of wakefulness” (before presumably sending her back to her consumptive slumbers). The Mainstream poem drip-feeds the reader with “finite literal sense” and releases a calmative dose of “emotional resonance” from her “individual life-experience.” It’s a simple game of identification; the reader applies the poem to her own life like a stencil. For Paterson, poetry is about the slight swelling of our own confines, not about release or freedom; it is the ideological defence of the reader as (in Gillian Rose’s term) “ultimate predator.”

Paterson augments his definition of poetry elsewhere in the essay. A poem has lines which fall short of the right margin. A poem “is a small thing that stands for a big thing.” “Pure lyric” is in its “simplest and neutral sense...an abiding interest in the old song-forms.” Paterson reads like the posthumous child of the Victorian interest in (half real, half conjured) folk forms, but without any of the radicalism. Why mess around with the nasty business of intellection, argumentation, or prosodic variety—which anyway originated with the Modernists—when you could reduce the entire breadth of the English poetic tradition to “old song-forms”? Since being in dialogue with such a reduced “tradition” is the single valid measure of poetry’s worth, nothing for Paterson is more damning than to declare the Postmoderns “unable to configure their relationship” with that or “any tradition” because of their focus on innovation. The Postmoderns seek novelty, the Mainstream, origi-

nality—the startling reincarnation of the old truths in the culture of the age.” Ah, the sweet smell of the old truths. (Where’s Beckett when you want him?) The grand old tradition was even able to assimilate Modernism rather than pouncing on it as a “revolutionary alternative” to what had become stale in English verse. Assimilation is Paterson’s ruling principle for artistic quality. Rather than progress, or god forbid “revolution,” we readers—he claims—want “happy accommodation.” He says that UK readers reject New Formalism, Postmodernist, and Language poets because these poets “appear to engage seriously with the false and very un-British paradigm of artistic progress.” Tradition is thus not something which progresses, but which finds ways to absorb external forces without changing its fundamental constitution.

It all reminds me of the “Best of British” boutique in Philadelphia where I grew up. Rich Americans can buy tea sets with pictures of the Queen’s jubilee, Christmas crackers, Hobnobs, mushy peas, Picalilly, and salad cream for about six times their price in Tesco’s supermarket. American consumers are sold a “British paradigm” made up of the archaic, the flavorless, and the vaguely revolting. Americans admire that paradigm because, according to Simic, they possess only utopian imaginations and are fixated on the future; the gormless British supply an essentially accommodating sense of “history.” British poets, “far more at home in their long poetic tradition” than the Americans (Simic), make what is merely backward look quaint, and (according to Paterson) “demonstrate an allegiance to more traditional ideas of form and poetic closure” than the Americans. Again, political positions are being confused with cultural myths, and the gravitas and sense of history which made Britain’s backing of the US war in Iraq symbolically useful—especially after the defection of much of “old Europe”—are being applied to poetry which would, and certainly should, challenge those very pre-suppositions.

This doesn’t give Paterson pause, and he marches straight through all politically charged writing with the description of poetry as “good for very little but itself” and “of no use.” As an illustration, he cites the Nth Position free e-book, *100 Poets Against the War*. For the first time, he considers issues of distribution: this project is reduced to “thousands of unread e-books” dumped in politicians in-trays. So what’s his point in celebrating the fact that poems about the war by Andrew Motion (a poet included in this anthology) or Tony Harrison made it into the *Guardian*? If poetry can be of no use, then I guess he’s saying that such poems were despicable, opportunistic acts of self-exposure, made allowable not by a media “still prepared to support the art” but by one which accords any mini-celebrity, no matter how puny, their fifteen seconds of fame. In the same paragraph, however, poetry suddenly becomes something capable of “inspiring” or “galvanising [its read-

ers] into action”—so long as that action is not writing poems themselves. 1,500 poets eventually called themselves “Poets Against the War,” he remarks, a number “which would seem to undermine the usefulness of the designation ‘poet.’” The designation is “useful” insofar as it is exclusive. This statement reveals a very particular and class-based idea about the relation between art-maker and art-consumer which should be kept in mind when reading Paterson’s reflections on populism, poetry, and the working class.

For Paterson is throbbing with nostalgia for ye olde populist poetry. British poetry is “populist” in that it seeks an audience, uses traditional forms, feels obliged to entertain, not because the populace actually reads it—“our sales are poor,” he admits. Here, Paterson again ties himself in knots; remember that he based his claims to this selection’s relevance on the “fact” that these poets “still sell books to a general [...] readership.” So his definition of “populism” shows itself to be essentially regressive and vacuous, based on “commonsense” values and traditional folk forms which no longer represent, or emerge from, public life. But if “a couple of thousand or a few hundred per book” is all that poetry can hope to sell, then Paterson must admit that there is no distinction in terms of the “general readership” between the Postmoderns and the Mainstream.

These terms are, above everything else, ideological. Paterson’s efforts to signal his working-class propriety make the politics that underpin his configuration of cultural forces not more, but less clear. He writes that “for those of us from poorer or working-class backgrounds, the news that you were going to dedicate your life to writing serious verse was received by the community with the same panic as might be your departure for Bader-Meinhof [sic] or a transsexual circus.” If Paterson’s childhood experiences did indeed lead him to think of poetry as illegal, marginal, and deviant, then it’s little wonder that his essay is at once so defensive and so desperate for acceptance and status. He does not beg that acceptance from the working class, however. Though he insists that “poetry must be *allowed* to reach the poorer inner cities” [emphasis mine], that class is not poetry’s “natural constituency.” Its natural constituency is the middle class. The bourgeois “literate and educated readership,” the “serious-fiction-reading, theatregoing, art-movie-viewing public” alone have the power as consumers to validate poetry’s cultural claims. And yet the bourgeoisie, he laments, doesn’t care about poetry. He makes the staggering remark that “no direct appeal” has ever been made to this constituency—as if the combined efforts of arts councils, concert halls, universities, libraries, newspapers, and magazines to promote poetry had always had someone else in mind. If this is the situation, and I doubt that it is, then his “general readership” is a fantastic projection of his private desires, not a ground for public polemic against poets for their failure to enthrall it.

Paterson is his own worst enemy; his own illogic undermines the credibility of his claims. But what is most disturbing about this essay is not its rhetorical failures, but the violence of its assault on all nonconformist practices, a violence which not only breaches critical decorum but also extinguishes the kind of expansive generosity which serious study of poetry should have helped Paterson to acquire. In an interview with Julia Fiedorczuk in Poland in September 2000, Paterson affirmed the value of criticism. But he added: "If you criticize to reduce, and to dissect, or make things more obscure than they really were by reading the things that simply aren't there, to project your own neuroses then no, I don't think it is a noble project, I think it's a vile thing to do." This essay is blistered by such projections. Paterson's not likely to explain why he took such an ill-conceived position, in a squalid little tract which reads like it was written in a few toxic hours and never edited (he doesn't even correctly cite the title of his one named opponent, the Oxford *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*). His essay is useful as a demonstration of how conservatism operates in the arts according to the same principles as it does in the capitals: its lynch pins are assimilation, veneration, and subordination; it is maintained by the controlled flow of resources, false proclamations of vulnerabilities, and a dark fixation with scapegoats. But rather than generating a provocative and representative dialogue about how and why poets struggle for limited resources, a dialogue in which British and American poets and readers of all persuasions might participate, Paterson has only succeeded in making himself look petty and foolish.

Andrea Brady

body experience; and the late return to figuration. If his life work could be represented cinematically, the abstract phase would be a kind of edit/splice, a dream sequence in a foreign language inserted in the film's story line, relateable in terms of color, palette, and gesture, but otherwise in need of a tortuous translationese to make it coherent with what came before and would come after. The late poet Ross Feld in his moving memoir of the artist, *Guston in Time* (Counterpoint, 2003), compares Guston's years in the trenches of the New York School to the life of a *marrano*, the name for those Jews, who during the time of the Inquisition in Spain, lived outwardly as Catholics while in secret followed the old Jewish rites. Feld sees Guston as "a secret image maker all along," one whose practices as an abstract expressionist were always subversively in the service of figuration. And indeed, the final phase of his career, the one I think Guston will be most remembered for, begins with his almost temporizing farewells to abstract expressionism, paintings such as *Mirror to S.K.* (1960) and *New Place* (1964), "abstract" works that show the brush strokes at the edge of the painter's control almost trying to be objects.

For me, Guston's work finds its fullest flower in those cartoonlike reworkings of personal and public history such as the Klan paintings (1968–70) and the *Phlebitis* series (1975), the *faux* mythmaking of pictures like *Pyramid and Shoe* (1976) or *The Line* (1978), and in the creation of such enormous, crowded paintings as *Plain* (1979) and *Group in Sea* (1979). His thick blood-red lines, seemingly careless brushwork, and poster paint greens, blues, and blacks are almost, to put it strongly, insulting.

Nothing in the art of the twentieth century, except perhaps for the bold outlinings and exaggerations of Beckmann's great work, quite prepares one for the shock of the visual vocabulary unique to Guston's later paintings. The break with abstract expression, courageous as it seems, pales before the daring of Guston's abandonment of painterly beauty, sublime images, and the rewards of subtlety. The "clunky, demotic style," as Andrew Graham-Dixon described it, of the pictures dating from the late '60s to the end of his life in 1980, disturb in every imaginable respect. Based in the anarchic gestures and imagery of the comic book (as a young man, Guston took a few correspondence-course lessons in cartooning), their crudity is intentional, partly in resonance with private and twentieth-century horrors, but also as a signal of Guston's complex break with the art-world values of his time. He left behind—stepped over might be a better phrase—the art-for-art's sake formalism invading the abstract painting world of the '60s, the on-the-horizon minimalist and conceptual art scenes, all of which, in a time of one world catastrophe after another, held to painterly notions of elegance and ravishing surfaces, not to mention market appeal, qualities Guston saw as capitulation to the *status quo* cultural, commercial, social, and political or-