

# SOME REFLECTIONS ON READING CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present article is to consider several aspects related to the reception of contemporary British poetry. An interview with the poet Michael Symmons Roberts will help us in our discussion. We will bear in mind Michael Schmidt's experience as an editor and his views on the role of literary critics with respect to poetry readership as well. In addition, we will provide a brief account of some British poetry magazines and of their impact in the forging of a wide and varied poetry reading audience. We will also argue that University poetry teachers play a decisive role in this matter as well.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary British poetry, Michael Schmidt, Michael Symmons Roberts, British poetry magazines.

## RESUMEN

El presente artículo pretende reflexionar sobre algunos aspectos relacionados con la lectura de la poesía británica contemporánea. Para cumplir este cometido, incluiremos una entrevista inédita con el poeta Michael Symmons Roberts. La amplia experiencia de Michael Schmidt como editor y su punto de vista sobre la relación de la crítica y la creación de una cultura de lectura de poesía, nos servirán de guía. Asimismo, haremos un breve repaso a algunas revistas especializadas en poesía británicas actuales y a su impacto en la creación de una comunidad de lectores de poesía amplia y variada. Defenderemos que la docencia de la poesía en la universidad juega un papel decisivo a la hora de forjar una cultura de lectura de poesía.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía contemporánea británica, Michael Schmidt, Michael Symmons Roberts, revistas de poesía británicas.

When considering the current status quo of contemporary British poetry, one of the first impressions we have is that it is undergoing a process of renewal. That is actually the case if we bear in mind the recent appointment of Carol Ann Duffy as Britain's Poet Laureate in May 2009, the first woman in history to hold the post. However, even if we were tempted to consider this event as a turning-

point, it is a fact that several changes have been taking place over the last few decades. Concepts such as mainstream, non-mainstream, experimental and marginal have been and still are being reconsidered. Hence, the present panorama of British poetry is clearly diverse, profound, rich and fresh, inasmuch as it allows the coexistence of different dynamising approaches to poetry. According to Romana Huk in her introduction to *Contemporary British Poetry. Essays in Theory and Criticism* (1996), this is

A situation that has been fostered as much by the ascendancy of certain kinds of literary theory and criticism as by the compelling presence of growing numbers of women poets, black poets from a range of differing cultural communities, poets writing out of postcolonial experience or submerged traditions in Scotland and Wales, regional and working-class poets, and poets of all inflections writing in experimental, oppositional and/or “Poststructuralist” forms. (Acheson and Huk 3)

We could certainly name various British poets representing each of the aforementioned cases nowadays, always at the risk of forgetting to mention some crucial figures for certain critics, editors, publishers, readers or for other poets. We certainly do not mean to be dogmatic here but, as our title suggests, offering some considerations of various influential issues in the reading of contemporary British poetry. In doing so, it is convenient to look at some of those aspects which have favoured its present revising tendency. In addition to the increasing number of women poets, black poets, postcolonial poets, regional and experimental poets, we are reading the work of poets who do not wish to be labelled at all, or who could belong to several of these categories at the same time. What is a fact is that they continue to write and that their motivations and styles are as varied as their personalities and circumstances.

When asking Michael Symmons Roberts, who very kindly accepted to be interviewed for the present article, for whom do poets write nowadays and if he has any particular type of reader in mind when writing poetry, he answered the following:

Like most poets, I do not have any reader in mind at the point of writing. At that point, all I am trying to do is to make the poem real, to make it complete and as strong as possible. After that point, I hope the potential audience for poetry (all poetry, not just mine) is broad and deep, even if poems do take a long time to find their way into our consciousness. (Roberts)

The appeal for the authentic poem which reaches our reading consciousness seems to be a constant for many contemporary poets. Their rejection to be restricted to the limits of definitions and to the constraints of certain type of demands responds partially to their priority of writing poetry for poetry's sake. This does not mean that poets ignore what the context in which they write is. Quite the contrary, as Michael Schmidt explains: “In the marketplace poetry is required to have a conscience, to evince a conscience, and often conscience of a specific kind” (Schmidt, *What*). Both the consciousness that Symmons Roberts refers to and the consciousness mentioned by Schmidt suggest the concern that the poet feels and is expected

to feel for the reader today. At the same time, they are aware of their condition as poets and they do struggle to achieve individuality within the collective they belong to. This is another reason why they would rather not be included in a set of clichéd or stereotyped definitions that would deprive them of their own personalities. In some cases, poets clearly neglect and challenge critics' possible attacks on their works, Wendy Cope being an illustrative example in her poem "Manifesto": "And if some bloodless literary fart/ Says that it's all too personal, I'll spit/ And write the poems that will win your heart" (32). She justifies her attitude by repeating in her poem that "I'll work, for there's new purpose in my art" (32). Therefore, it is not a general must for poets today to follow a particular direction or to be included in a specific field, and sometimes it is the seed to prejudice or bias potential poetry readers. Many of them do disagree with particular readings or classifications of their works and poetic styles, not to mention with general definitions of them as poets. To illustrate this, we just have to quote Carol Ann Duffy's answer to Jeanette Winterson's question about the implications of sexuality in the former's work: "I define myself as a poet and as a mother —that's all" (Winterson).

We observe then in many contemporary British poets a general inclination to self-definition and individuality which is not exclusive of their awareness of their belonging to the poetic domain. Trying to tell which of these two aspects is prior to them is not an easy task as it totally depends on every creator and on the field that he or she writes in. On the one hand, those who are now writing Innovative Poetry seem to be strongly aware of the collective they belong to, conceiving their approach as contesting, debating, renewing and dynamising. On the other hand, we can also appreciate these attitudes in those who are writing in the field of the mainstream working on new topics and subjects while keeping traditional structures in their poems. Actually, the work of several poets today, the current acceptance and even celebration of conditions and attitudes considered as marginal until quite recently, the eclectic tendency of certain presses and magazines and the growing number of experimental works and publications, prove that the limits between both trends are getting more and more blurred. When asking Michael Symmons Roberts whether there is any current mainstream in contemporary British poetry, and if we are witnessing any special turn in British poetry nowadays, he explains that

It is hard to talk about a 'mainstream' in a (comparatively) invisible art form. Even the most successful contemporary poets hardly approach the audience of many novelists. But contemporary British poetry is very broad, and alongside the major trade publishers there are some very strong smaller specialist presses. The poets themselves are pushing ahead in different ways —some into the liberation of stricter forms, some towards book-length sequences, some taking the short lyric poem into unfamiliar territory. Poets will write, whatever the circumstances of the poetry scene, because they have to write.

The diversity of these lines bears witness to the different directions in current British poetry. Thus, poetry readers can choose which type of poetry they wish to read, provided they know what the options are. The poetry reading public must then be informed about the possibilities they may encounter. Where are they to look for

this reading guide? A curious average reader today has many possibilities to search for information thanks to the internet, for example. There is also a considerable variety of books, articles, essays and reviews, more or less specialized depending on the audience they are addressed to, written by literary critics, reviewers, editors and poets. All of these mean to attract the readers' attention so that poetry is actually read. That is to say, they try to foster a culture of reception.

This is one of the aspects discussed by Michael Schmidt in his lecture "What, How Well, Why? Michael Schmidt," which he gave at *Stanza, Scotland's International Poetry Festival* in 2006. He defends that a public and accessible review culture is necessary for one of reception to exist: "A culture of reception, it seems to me, is public, not contained within the academy, though academics and theorists are welcome to contribute to it" (Schmidt, "What"). Schmidt's remark about the need of a public approach on the part of literary critics, so that poetry readership increases, is certainly thought-provoking. Being an academic himself, he proposes and even seems to encourage his colleagues to enter the public sphere as an effective means to achieve more poetry readers than poets. It is not the first time that Schmidt admits the limitations of poetry literary critics and publications. He has even expressed his concern about the role of academics which, because it is generally too specialized, is thus also restrictive and biased. In "Loose Ends", the final chapter of his seminal work *Lives of the Poets* (1998), Schmidt explains that:

Books about poetry either limit the period they cover or concentrate on a theme. My history is peculiar in that it is written by a reader who —though he teaches in a university— distrusts critical specialism. The real academic work, that of the scholar, is necessarily specialized and of great value in establishing and recovering texts, but many academic *critics* only feel confident in judgement in a specific period, or drive a theoretical skewer through poetry, investing their faith not in a poem but in a predetermined approach to poetry. (1052)

However contradictory it might seem that an academic is skeptical about scholarly specialisation, the apparent paradox is easily explained if we consider Schmidt's career and his effort in cultivating a public criticism and promoting a broad culture of reception. Being a poet, novelist, literary historian, translator, professor and editor, he does have more than a word to say about the present situation of contemporary British poetry, whether we might agree or disagree with his views. His effort to foreground poetry to the public may as well have been one crucial motivation so that, together with Brian Cox he founded *Poetry Nation* in 1973, later to become *PN Review* in 1976. Schmidt has always had an active role in the editorial board and is currently the General Editor. In addition to trying to broaden the scope of British poetry reading, writing and criticism with this magazine, he was also founder of Carcanet Press in 1969 now being its Editorial and Managing Director. His rich international cultural background and his productive versatility sustain Schmidt's undeniable and respectful contribution to the development of contemporary British poetry. His career echoes his ideas as it takes poetry to the public arena, thus fostering a public culture of reception.

We are returning now to the previous quotation, in which Schmidt also mentioned his university teaching. Although he advocates for public criticism and debate as prior to an academic approach, we believe that University poetry teachers also have a role to play in poetry readership. Having taught contemporary British poetry over the last thirteen years, I have experienced that it is not only a must for us to provide students with the essential contexts to learn about poems and poets. It is also our task to try and cultivate students' love for poetry and curiosity to read those poems which move them, and to talk to others about them, so that the knowledge they might receive and the passion they may feel could be shared by others beyond the limits of university premises. It is a most rewarding experience to witness how a student gets involved in a particular poem, reading it aloud until getting familiar with its cadences and sounds, working out the meaning of words and trying to make sense of them within and outside the poem's unity, until he or she seems to exclaim a sort of eureka when finally finding at least one explanation for the lines in question, hence deciding that they like the poem, or maybe the contrary. Whatever the final decision, the fact that they read, debate and link poetry to their own lives is a means to encourage them to continue reading contemporary British poetry and, why not, poetry in general. The study of other poets, whether contemporary or not, does also help to enhance their poetry reading competence and curiosity and hopefully that of the others they talk to about poetry. However, we cannot take for granted that because students can read poetry it immediately ensures their comprehending it. It is at this point worthy to remember W.H. Auden's position in "Writing":

Writers, poets especially, have an odd relation to the public because their medium, language, is not, like the paint of the painter or the notes of the composer, reserved for their use but is the common property of the linguistic group to which they belong. Lots of people are willing to admit that they don't understand painting or music, but very few indeed who have been to school and learnt to read advertisements will admit that they don't understand English. (242)

As a poetry reader, the student does generally need help to perceive aspects that he cannot grasp at first, or even at second readings. Since we naturally tend to love that we know, their better understanding would favour their love for poetry, thus the poetry teacher's role in this sense is again justified. Actually, not only university but school poetry teaching nurtures and enhances a poetry readership. When in 1996 *The Nation's Favourite Poems* was first published, many people voted for the poems they studied at school and still remembered, so that they would be included in the book. In the foreword to this edition it is stated that "if this is merely a collection of 'O' Level standard English Primer gems, then we ought to be grateful to the nation's English masters" (6). Reading experience is not a synonym for reading competence, and certainly not enough to ensure the widening and rising of a poetry reading culture. Poetry teaching is a decisive bridge between them.

University poetry teaching is also important for poets who work in the field. Michael Symmons Roberts talks to us about how his experience on creative

writing and poetry teaching at Manchester Metropolitan University influences his writing: “The teaching influences the writing in various ways. For example, the workshops force you to elucidate what makes a poem work and what hinders it, and the literature courses send you back to great poems and poets from the past.” Therefore, poetry teaching is related both to the writing and readership of contemporary British poetry. The views about the latter will vary depending on the teacher, whether the teaching is combined with poetry writing or not.

Therefore, some of the aspects contributing to foster a broader culture of reception for poetry today could be a public critical activity and a commitment of poetry University teachers working in that direction. In addition, “the major trade publishers” and “some very strong smaller specialist presses” mentioned by Symmons Roberts above do certainly influence on the poetry reading public. We would like to draw our attention now to the activity of some poetry magazines, whether they are considered “major” or “little”. Our interest does not lie in their category, but in their activity and in their impact on the poetic audience. Whether we agree or disagree with their work, it is just commonsensical and a must to remind their commitment to contemporary British poetry and to poetry in general.

As it is well-known, one of the oldest poetry magazines in Britain is *The London Magazine*, first founded in 1732 and reappearing in 1820. Steven O’Brien being its current editor, it does not only publish poems from celebrated and unknown authors, besides critical work on poetry, but also expands its approach to other subjects such as cinema and the relation of poets to various contemporary issues. Another long-standing and well-established British poetry magazine is *Poetry Review*, the Poetry Society’s magazine, first published in 1912 under Harold Monro’s editorship. Since then, the different magazine’s editors have given it their particular viewpoints. It presents the reader with poems, reviews and critical work on contemporary British and also international poets, edited by Fiona Sampson. Another abiding poetry magazine is *Agenda*, founded in 1959 by Ezra Pound and William Cookson. Presently edited by Patricia McCarthy, this internationally recognized journal covers poems, critical essays and reviews, offering also special issues on a particular well-known poet, whether dead or alive. They are now giving room for young poets in the online *Broadsheets*. Hence, they are not only concerned with tradition, but also with the new. Another poetry magazine which devotes space to both influential and emerging poets is *Acumen*, started by Patricia Oxley in 1985. It does not only offer poems, but also reviews, articles and interviews.

In the current panorama of poetry magazines in Britain, we also find *Ambit*, which publishes new poems and short fiction from widely-known and beginning poets, providing illustrated pages and only brief reviews. Founded in 1959 by Martin Bax, the magazine’s remit is characterized by a penchant for the experimental and new. The fact that Carol Ann Duffy is a member of its consultants reveals that the mainstream and the experimental are not so distant in the scene of British poetry nowadays. A special inclination, although not an exclusive one, for the new and experimental is also to be found in *Shearsman Magazine*, edited by Tony Frazer, originally appearing in 1981. Their scope is not only Britain, since they also publish contemporary international poetry, mainly from the U.S. Shearsman Books

moves in the same line, offering also room for works on translations and rendering space for the classics as well. The diversity and dynamism which characterise *Shearsman Magazine* are also present in *Stand Magazine*, since it includes new poetry, criticism and fiction. Emerging British poets later to become well-known authors found in *Stand* an initial welcoming space where to make their works known. International poets, thanks to the translations included in the journal, also find a place in it. The magazine started in 1952 springing out of a concern for poetry and fiction in particular and for arts in general. A specialized and independent poetry magazine, advocating for innovative submissions is *Erbacce*, which from 2004 publishes independently the work of both established and rising poets which fits the journal's radical stance, also including interviews. Edited by Alan Corkish and Andrew Taylor, the magazine covers the work of British and international poets. Finally, we would like to mention one of the most recent British poetry magazines, *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, founded in 2009 by Robert Sheppard and Scott Thurston who are also the magazine's editors. Its name does clearly tell about the journal's remit. It is interested in publishing poems written in the innovative field of contemporary British and Irish poetry, aiming also at including critical work on the teaching, reading and writing of contemporary poetry. That is to say, the editors are trying to take their University experiences out of the academic premises. They are also poets, editors and are well-published in the area of innovative poetry. May the magazine's history be as abiding as that of the first ones we have mentioned above.

This brief account of some of the poetry magazines in Britain today reveals their varied commitments and efforts to publish the work of contemporary British and international poets, translations, interviews, reviews and writing relating poetry to other arts, disciplines, and subjects. Each of them presents a particular stance. Whether they are innovative, mainstream, or midstream, they all work in the common direction of fostering a poetry reading culture of reception. It is remarkable that many of them have been founded and edited by poets and critics who are also university teachers. I feel that we may all contribute to the fomenting and enhancing of a broad and devoted readership for contemporary British poetry. In doing so, we must share knowledge, experience, ideas, and also bear in mind Philip Larkin's "The Pleasure Principle": "But at bottom poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost the only audience worth having, for which the dutiful mob that signs on every September is no substitute" (1068).

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