Editorial

This issue of *Critical Survey* seeks to affirm the importance of contemporary poetry. For poetry *can* make something ‘happen’ – in the sphere of intersubjective awareness, of intelligence, of general ideology. That is not ‘nothing’. As guest editor, I am grateful to academic colleagues and featured poets alike for making this edition possible. The focus here is on British poetry written by men. Although the articles do not engage directly with a recent interest in ‘Masculinities’, it is implicit that poetic exploration of what it is to be gendered male is an important issue.

Hence the title: ‘Contemporary British Male Poetry’. Of course, the term ‘British’ has itself become problematic, especially since Seamus Heaney objected to its use in his case. Hopefully the poets considered here will not, in theirs. At any rate, the word is used here to distinguish poets writing in the United Kingdom from the multiplicity of poetry in the English language currently produced around the globe. The aim is to categorise, not to nationalise. At the same time, ‘Contemporary’ means poetry written since 1945. It, too, is used categorically but with the emphasis on the last thirty or so years.

The issue begins with two ‘review articles’ on anthologies published over some fifty years. The emphases differ considerably, but as I have written elsewhere: ‘there is room in both life and letters for a multifarious “poeticity”’. The important thing is that a lot of poetic ground gets covered, and that the authors make their cases with conviction. Indeed, what is evident from all the contributions is that poetry very much engages the loyalty, passion and intelligence of those who care for it. And this at a time when, as John Lucas indicates, mainstream publishers seem reluctant to commit themselves to it. The critical engagement evident here is worth celebration in itself.

Yet we live in altered times. In the institutional academy it is literary theorists who are now ‘canonical’ – not poets. Whatever you make of, say, Tony Harrison or J. H. Prynne or Simon Armitage is small beer compared to your familiarity with Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan or Jacques Derrida. The Platonic repressed returns – and returns. This is not to say that theorists do not provide important

insights into what to look for in poetry and how it relates to a wider world of understanding: they do. But a power-shift in attention from the creative writer to the quasi-philosopher has been at work for some thirty years, and the 'dominant' (as they say) is now theory. For whatever reason, the spectre of 'Paris 1968' weighs like 'Dreamtime' on the brains of most cultural commentators. However, 'Paris 1968' is an 'old time religion', while poetry remains 'NEWS THAT STAYS NEWS'. This issue is about poetry – and about now.

However, it is about 'literary' poetry. In the postmodern era Pound's dream of a reunification of verse and song has become reality. When Allen Ginsberg took tapes of Bob Dylan and the Beatles to the fading genius (and political reprobate) at Rapallo, it was an exemplary moment. And whatever one thinks about the Bernie Taupin/Elton John rewrite of 'Candle in the Wind', its spectacular popularity is evidence of what counts for most people about rhythm, rhyme and melody. One need not quarrel with that. But 'literary' poetry – which combines pre-literate orality and scribal art – reaches the parts that such pop songs cannot. The work of Sean O'Brien, Michael Longley, Peter Reading or Matthew Sweeney (discussed in articles below) transcends immediate populism: they are likely to stay 'NEWS'.

The social and ideological placement of poetry remains odd. *Paradise Lost* constitutes an index of a certain kind of Protestant theology, Blake's poems an entrée into English social history and Wilfred Owen's war poetry a vital supplement to military history – yet where in our libraries and bookshops are these works to be found? As a discourse, poetry is thoroughly ghettoised. There may be some advantages to this (poetry as 'protected species'). But there are disadvantages – for society as well as for poetry. For instance, if poetry had enjoyed a discursive status on a par with, say, biology and zoology, there might have been a Green Movement from the time of William Wordsworth. Why is it that writing in rhythmical form (whether by William Cowper on the one hand or Erasmus Darwin on the other) has been regarded as a cultural 'Other', corralled into the 'Poetry Corner' and tucked largely out of sight?

Poetry should be prioritised as probably the sanest discourse currently on offer. And its sanity precisely lies in its resonance for the whole person: its rhythms speak to the body (heart-beat, breath and the whole physiological 'clock'); its themes engage the mind; its affects quicken the spirit. Poems have been used in at least one hospital as an alternative to sedatives; they have been posted up, to some

effect, on tube train interiors; they are being introduced, now, into some businesses. It is surely time for all those involved in the writing and reading of poetry to stop cavilling about ‘experimentalism’ versus ‘traditionalism’, this particular grouping or that, who’s ‘in’ and who’s ‘out’, and unite on the importance of poetry as a specific discourse (if we must call it that) – perhaps the last gig in town where the ‘sound-bites’ are worth remembering. For poetry still aims at that – memorability. It is, as R. S. Thomas has put it: ‘eternity wearing/the green leaves of time’.

This edition of *Critical Survey* aims to show how that is still done. Yet the (fortuitous) thrust here is ‘male’ as well as ‘British’. It’s where we start from, for now. Glyn Maxwell has recently written (in *Rest For The Wicked*, 1995):

And what you sing in the dark is the plain song
Of men alone ...
And blue with wonder, and beating a way back home ...

That’s what it sounds like: that’s how it is.

Dennis Brown