



the  
twentieth  
century  
in  
poetry

a critical survey

peter childs

# THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN POETRY

## **How has the twentieth century been represented in poetry?**

*The Twentieth Century in Poetry* examines both 'English' poetry through the events of the twentieth century, and British history through its representations in recent poetry. It builds a narrative not of poetry in the twentieth century but of the twentieth century in poetry.

A high proportion of literature courses include an exploration of questions of gender, ethnicity, theory, nationality, politics, and social class. But until now most teaching has focused on the novel as the most useful way of raising these issues. In *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* Peter Childs demonstrates that all poetry is historically produced and consumed, and is part of our understanding of society and identity. This student-friendly critical survey includes chapters on:

- the Georgians
- poetry of World War I
- Eliot
- Yeats
- the 1930s
- postwar poetry
- contemporary anthologies
- women's poetry
- Northern Irish and black British poets

Placing literature in a wider social context, this book is a fascinating examination of the way in which recent theory has questioned divisions between 'history' and literature, between 'text' and 'event', between society and the individual.

**Peter Childs** is Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies at John Moores University, Liverpool.

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# THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN POETRY

A critical survey

*Peter Childs*

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TO MY PARENTS, JOHN AND  
PATRICIA CHILDS

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* on 29 August 1997, Peter Barry, Secretary of the English Association, was quoted as saying that the teaching of poetry had come increasingly 'under threat' in literature departments. He put this trend down to modularisation and the rise of student choice. The message would appear to be that nowadays students who are not forced to will seldom elect to study poetry. This phenomenon has perhaps two chief causes: students associate poetry with difficulty, in terms of form and sense, and they dissociate it from society, which seems to them more adequately treated in the longer, polyphonic narratives of fiction.

*The Twentieth Century in Poetry* is in part an attempt to resist this trend by plotting connections between society, history, narrative and poetry. The book's premise is that poetry can be effectively used to explore questions of gender, ethnicity, national identity, politics, and class that are now the core issues of a high proportion of literature courses but which are most frequently raised in connection with the novel. The reverse is also true and these same issues should be employed to analyse poetry in terms of social history.

Consequently, my chief aim is to reassert that all poetry is historically produced and consumed, and is part of the intertextual weave of discourses that structure our understanding of society and identity. To suggest the variety of levels at which poetry can be approached in terms of history, different chapters in the first half of the book respectively cover one poem (*The Waste Land*), one poet (Yeats), one decade (the 1930s), one event (World War I), and one 'style' (Georgian poetry). To a degree, the chapters' complexity reflects that of the poetry, and the more in-depth discussions of the modernists, Eliot and Yeats, are less straightforward and more theoretical than the others. Chapters in the second half aim to delineate in poetry the social fracturing and restructuring of postwar British society – two chapters offer period-based

reviews of the poetic 'mainstream' and two chapters concentrate on the 'alternative currents' of women's and 'post-colonial' poetry which are increasingly producing the most innovative, socially relevant poetry.

It is impossible in a short overview such as this to give adequate coverage to even the best-known twentieth-century British poets (e.g. Ted Hughes and Dylan Thomas are mentioned only briefly). However, a large number of the most commonly taught poems, poets, and collections have been chosen for consideration and they are augmented by texts which seem to require more attention given the book's general approach. For purposes of accessibility, examples have been drawn from widely available anthologies wherever possible – in most instances, the poets' more well-known works are the ones discussed and cited. The detail of the analyses varies greatly and very few poems are interpreted closely or quoted at length, in keeping with the book's aim to situate the texts less as significant personal utterances than as literary interventions in social discourses.

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

Can anyone but a philistine, you will ask, talk about lyric poetry and society?

(Adorno 1989)

As its title indicates, this book tries to do two things: to sketch the ways in which poetry since 1900 has engaged with historical events and to construct a narrative of the century through the poetry it has produced. Yet, to regard poetry as distinct from history has to an extent become an inevitable 'habit of reading' in critical practice. Terry Eagleton observes that 'poetry is of all literary genres the one most apparently sealed from history, the one where "sensibility" may play in its purest, least socially tainted form' (Eagleton 1983: 51). Among the literary genres, poetry is seen as the most personal, the most emotional and introspective, the least social or political. If the novel orchestrates a number of characters, and drama functions through dialogue, then poetry appears to be sealed, sometimes almost hermetically, from the outside world, as the isolated writer communicates a personal message to the solitary reader. However, to take just the Romantics, this ahistorical view would obviously be frustrated by any analysis of Shelley's 'The Mask of Anarchy' or Byron's 'The Vision of Judgement'. These are poems whose content engages explicitly, though imaginatively, with contemporary politics – poems of the variety found in Kenneth Baker's anthology, *The Faber Book of English History in Verse*, which represents one attempt to place poems in terms of their reaction to social events and to construct a historical narrative, however scanty, through poetry. From another perspective, we need also to remember that it is only since the invention of the printing press that reading poetry has gradually come to replace the more traditional activity of the poetry reading (revived since the 1960s by an increased interest in performance poetry).

However, these are elementary connections between poetry and society, and there are other ways of linking the two than through an attention to a poem's overt message or its social performance. On the one hand, poetry may not frequently comment on the historical situation in which it was written but its subject matter will nevertheless be a product of that moment, of the ideologies, beliefs, convictions, and attitudes of its time. On the other hand, what we call the 'form' of a poem is also fashioned by contemporary preferences and orthodoxies: the sonnet *appears* ideal for love poetry, the iambic pentameter *seems* to give the best rhythm to the English language. Form is in fact neither autonomous nor separable from content, because it is shaped by literary history, by dominant ideological structures, and by the relationship between writer and reader (Eagleton 1976b: 26).

The prevailing view of the twentieth century, since the interventions in the 1920s of critics such as T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards, is that a poem's meaning exists in the words on the page. Which means that no outside or extraneous knowledge, such as the author's biography, is needed to uncover a poem's significance or quality; as a distinct artefact the self-sufficient poem stands aside from author, reader, and history. The belief underlying this view is that a well-made poem, like a good detective novel, contains in itself all the clues necessary for the reader's understanding – a theory which actually, though denying it, locates the 'truth' in the author once again: in the author's success in embodying his or her intended meaning in the poem's language and form. It is assumed that the poem has a common subject and the author's task is to achieve a complex unity of all the poem's aspects in expressing that universal theme (mortality, unrequited love, the glory/horror of war), while the reader's task is to assess the poem's – which is in fact to say the author's – methodology and success. New Criticism, to give this approach a name, despite its valorisation of irony and paradox, seems both to fix the poem's meaning too rigidly and to ignore the conditions of its material production and consumption.<sup>1</sup> Other theories, which locate meaning in the reader's encounter, in a specific cultural situation, with the particular poem, produced at a certain time and place, free meaning from the 'words on the page' and locate it instead in the processes of social language and the discourses of history.<sup>2</sup> In other words, a reader in 1850 will ascribe a different meaning to *Hamlet* from a reader in 1990, and a reader in Delhi is likely to react differently to Kipling's poetry from a reader in Oslo. It is also a point made in a short story by Jorge Luis Borges that, in his example, *Don Quixote* would 'mean' something very different had it been authored by a twentieth-century Frenchman and not a

seventeenth-century Spaniard.<sup>3</sup> To stress the importance of literature's time of production, critics often also make distinctions between texts written about their own time and 'historical writing'.

When considering the relation between literature and history, we should additionally register the fact that many recent theorists, from the institutional disciplines of history and English, have questioned the traditional boundary between the two. While literary critics have increasingly incorporated historical perspectives into their analyses, historians such as Hayden White have insisted on the constructed nature of all historiography, which is to say its use of narrative, conjecture, metaphor, perspective, and imagery.<sup>4</sup> All writing, whether it be historical or poetical, is published from one location at one point in time, and is addressed to a particular and almost invariably contemporary audience; which is not to say that we cannot make distinctions between poetry and history, but that we must remember that both are constructed in language and in social situations. A similar interrogation of the difference between text and event has taken place. If an event, such as the Battle of the Somme or the 1968 Olympics, is only available to us as a series of accounts in books and films then its difference from any other text is only marked by our acceptance of its roots in a particular occurrence in the real world: we only have access to the event through written or recorded accounts, through texts.

It is partly the 'form' in which history is written that leads us to accept it as more objective than subjective. In relation to this, Catherine Belsey explains a distinction made by the critic Emile Benveniste between discourse, which we associate with literature, and history:

History narrates events apparently without the intervention of a speaker. In history there is no mention of 'you' and 'I'; 'the events seem to narrate themselves.' Discourse on the other hand, assumes a speaker and a hearer, the 'you' and 'I' of dialogue.

(Belsey 1980: 71)

In this respect, biography sits alongside history, which is partly why a writer such as Peter Ackroyd has tried to experiment with the genre's form in his 'life narratives' of writers such as Dickens: by introducing imaginary dialogues, conjectured situations, and first-person interventions into his own third-person account.

In general, the presence of a third-person omniscient narrator will nearly always privilege 'history' as authoritative; despite the fact that



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there are likely to be several competing accounts of a period or subject. Similarly, first-person writing, as poetry often is, more often meets with an emotional response because the reader identifies with the position of the speaker. A related point to make but not labour is that just as history can become the subject of poetry, poetry is a part of history, produced within it and adding to it (e.g. Shakespeare probably provides the most familiar images of Richard III). Consequently, this book considers history alongside poetical texts. However, as I've already argued, history is also textual and, while I'll be talking about contexts, the distinction between texts and contexts is really that between one set of texts and another set – between texts and inter-texts.<sup>5</sup> Which is to say that everything is textual, and therefore we cannot invoke 'history' in any absolute sense because

all we can hope to recover of the past is other representations of it.... But if we can compare a poem, as a discursive account of reality, with other contemporary accounts, we can begin to understand it...as the embodiment of a partial view of the world in competition with other partial views; as political, and not as universal.

(Barrell 1988: 12)

Another traditional division we need to consider briefly in this introduction is that between society and the individual, a separation often associated with the difference between history, a collective experience, and poetry, a personal expression. (A similarly aligned opposition between 'fact' and 'feeling' might also be challenged.) This should be considered in several ways. Since the Romantics, 'the individual' has become an especially privileged category, and particularly in poetry, as the writer has come to be seen not as 'holding a mirror up to reality' but as generating light from an internal lamp – the individual as not reflection but fount(ain). Inspiration, feeling, and individual genius come to be treated as more important than social codes and values. Matthew Arnold's lost spirit on 'Dover Beach' expresses this isolation, as does D.H. Lawrence's assertion that the only clue to the universe is the individual soul within the individual being (Lawrence 1971: 150). This championing of the self can be read in terms of other ideologies, such as the principles of capitalist society – in distinction from the collectivism of socialism – which rely on competition and the entrepreneur. Again, as Toril Moi writes in her attack on 'traditional bourgeois humanism of a liberal-individualist kind', modern Western society has modelled its idea of the author in terms akin to divinity: 'In

this humanist ideology the self is the sole author of history and of the literary text: the humanist creator is potent, phallic and male – God in relation to his world, the author in relation to his text' (Moi 1985: 6–8). In contrast to this, recent critical and cultural theory emphasises that the individual cannot be separated off from society, that people's views are not the product of their own autonomous deliberations but of discourses that vie for their identification (their self-recognition or agreement) from the moment they are born. Also, we should remember that the period examined in this book is that of mass state expansion, of new global technologies, and of multinational corporations, all of which dispense with the category of the individual in favour of the citizen, the viewer, the customer or the consumer.

One way of starting to look at twentieth-century poetry is through the anthologies that have outlined and influenced opinion at particular moments. That is to say, the century can be divided into 'key' though contentious anthologies which have sought to rank the poets and the poetry of their generation. The vogue for anthologies was set by the archetypal collection of the later nineteenth century, F.T. Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* (1861), which attempted to restrict the canon to lyric poetry. The authoritative status of *The Golden Treasury* itself is illustrated by the fact that it is still in print today, updated to include recent writers such as Fleur Adcock and Tony Harrison. However, Palgrave's was displaced as the definitive collection after 1900 by the original *Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (while Palgrave had become Oxford Professor of Poetry, Quiller-Couch was appointed in 1912 the first King Edward VII Professor of *English Literature* at Cambridge). The first significant collection of twentieth-century poets was Edward Marsh's *ultraEnglish Georgian Poetry 1911–1912*, soon followed by Ezra Pound's *unEnglish Des Imagistes* in 1914. These two volumes defined the poles of poetry for the next fifteen years, ranging from the innovative but never widely popular work of the modernists to the largely unexceptionable but also unexceptional verse of the Georgians, whose continuing appeal can be gauged by the fact that Sir Algernon Methuen's predominantly Georgian *Anthology of Modern Verse* was reprinted nearly eighty times between 1921 and the end of World War II.

The 1930s was chiefly notable for three highly praised left-wing collections edited by Michael Roberts. Together, these publications helped to make W.H. Auden the undoubted pre-eminent poet of the time: *New Signatures* (1932), *New Country* (1933), and the long-lasting *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936). Consequently, Auden, Louis

MacNeice, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis, disparagingly lumped together by some as 'MacSpaunday', were also known at the time as not the 'Thirties poets' but the 'New Country' poets. Their admiration for Eliot, the war poets, Yeats, and some aspects of prewar verse suggested a new poetry that might form a bridge between the conservative Georgian and radical modernist styles that were splitting 'English poetry' apart. *New Signatures* effectively signalled a fresh literary direction which almost immediately made redundant Harold Monro's somewhat premature and perhaps ill-timed *Twentieth-Century Poetry* (1929).

Since World War II, a good number of influential anthologies have been published, beginning in 1950 with Hermann Peschmann's retrospective *The Voice of Poetry 1930–1950*. However, the first of great importance was Robert Conquest's 1956 *New Lines* which heralded the emergence of 'The Movement' poets and Philip Larkin in particular (Conquest's introduction is seen as a kind of manifesto, one which defends the conversational style and formal conservatism of his chosen poets and attacks in particular the 'Apocalyptic' poets of the 1940s, such as J.F. Hendry, Vernon Watkins, Norman MacCaig, and Nicholas Moore).<sup>6</sup> As a response to Conquest's book, A. Alvarez published *The New Poetry* in 1962 (and re-published it in 1966, foregrounding writers including Sylvia Plath). Partly because of its polemical prefatory remarks, *The New Poetry* soon became established as the significant postwar anthology, with Alvarez replying to *New Lines* by insisting that modern poetry must engage with contemporary society. Although in 1962 Penguin relaunched Kenneth Allot's 1950s collection of the *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, now covering 1918–60, and in 1965 issued David Wright's *The Mid-Century: English Poetry 1940–1960*, Alvarez's book, with its argumentative and agenda-setting preface, remained the important collection.<sup>7</sup> In 1970 Penguin published Edward Lucie-Smith's capacious *British Poetry Since 1945*, which has been repeatedly revised but has always seemed too disparate, as has D.J. Enright's *Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945–1980*. The most influential collections have remained those that are closely focused and seem to be 'of the moment'. In 1982 Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion published the next anthology to gain wide acceptance, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* – a very judgemental selection, rather than collection, of twenty poets. Its stated aim was to mark the eclipse of Alvarez's anthology and to delineate another new poetry characterised by narrative, extreme metaphor, observation, and postmodernism. Since then poetry publication has undergone a number of changes, most notable of which is perhaps the

continued emergence of influential presses away from the English south-east, particularly Bloodaxe books in Newcastle. In 1993, to echo Alvarez's book and to attempt an overthrow of the 1982 Penguin anthology, Michael Hulse, David Kennedy, and David Morley published their Bloodaxe collection, *The New Poetry*, which 'represents what we believe to be the best poetry published in the British Isles in the 1980s and early 1990s'. It features none of the score of poets elevated by the Morrison and Motion book, and is curiously homogenising in its introductory remarks, claiming a new cohesiveness and the end of 'British poetry's tribal divisions'.

Against such gestures towards commonality, since the mid-1980s the politics of anthologies has been trenchantly debated, and many more alternative, regional, or specialised anthologies have also been published. Even those with an overarching aim, such as Paladin's *The New British Poetry* (1988), stress gender and ethnicity in their selections. Volumes of English language poetry from India or Africa had been available long before this, but there has been a recent growth in surveys such as anthologies of Caribbean poetry (*Hinterland*, 1989, and *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, 1986). Since the 1980s there has also been a proliferation of women-only collections (for example, *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry*, 1987, and *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets*, 1985). These are catering for different markets but also challenging the hegemony of the tradition of white, male-dominated anthologies like *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (which has no black and only five women poets, none with more than seven poems, as opposed to Heaney's twenty and Christopher Reid's or Tom Paulin's eleven). Such specificity is a refusal of universalism in favour of collections which acknowledge the politics of gender, nation, sexuality, region, or genre. The liking for definitive epoch-making anthologies survives, as with Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*, but many editors eschew introducing an hierarchical order of merit. Carol Rumens has suggested that perhaps 'the desire to elect leaders and order everyone else to fall into step behind is a quirk peculiar to English male anthologists' (Longley 1996: 9).

The clearest message from this very brief summary should be that anthologists have reacted against each other – that each widely accepted and adopted collection (as well as many neglected ones) has sought to challenge the view of poetry advocated by a previous editor.<sup>8</sup> 'New' remains the most common adjective in poetry anthologies. It is also worth noting that the foremost poets of their generation have often been asked to compile modern anthologies although these have rarely become the standard textbooks of their time: from Yeats's *Oxford*

*Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (1936), Auden's *Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1939), Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973), and Heaney and Hughes's *The Rattle Bag* (1985) through to Fleur Adcock's *Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry* (1987). Unlike Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, influential twentieth-century anthologies have generally been those that choose a small selection of emergent poets and argue that they constitute a new generation or a shift in poetic sensibility.

A second way of beginning to introduce poetry since 1900 is to consider the two influential poets, both equally well known for their fiction, who stand at the gate of the twentieth century: Hardy and Kipling. Apart from Yeats, whom I will look at in a later chapter, these are the two most important figures as the century begins. They have much in common, such as an interest in ballad and song forms, in what Kipling calls the 'uncounted folk', and in vernacular. But they also represent the poles of dominant versions of national identity in 1900: Hardy, whose provincial, bucolic poetry looks to the past and laments the erosion of its traditions, proffers an ambivalent contemporary national identity that is the opposite of Kipling's almost devout imperial vision (though Kipling was to locate Englishness in Sussex nearly as much as Hardy found it in Wessex). Which is perhaps why Hardy appears to talk of individuated characters whereas Kipling utilises composite or representative figures. Kipling, far and away the most popular and successful writer of his day, is still often marginalised as a poet in academic circles because of his association with the Empire, which too frequently confines him to academic work within colonial studies. Orwell's comment from 1942 has now applied for twice as long: 'During five literary generations every enlightened person has despised him, and at the end of that time nine tenths of those enlightened persons are forgotten and Kipling is in a sense still there' (Orwell 1965: 45). As Auden once wrote, 'time' has indeed 'Pardoned Kipling and his views', such that, in 1995, Kipling's 'If' was voted favourite poem in a BBC national poll.<sup>9</sup> For the majority of the poets I will discuss in the next chapter, Kipling is the genius of contemporary literature and provides the benchmark against which their work is judged. Though he is a far more versatile writer than those who followed him, Kipling's robust rhythms and sing-song lyrics become for many poets the models for their verse, as do his frequent themes of imperialism and national identity. By contrast, it is often argued, at greatest length by Donald Davie in his book *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973), that Hardy is the key writer at the turn of the century who links the English poetry of the past found in the work of Wordsworth and Tennyson, to the

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supposed mainstream of twentieth-century poetry running through Edward Thomas, W.H. Auden, and Philip Larkin. In this narrative, the innovations and experiments of 1920s modernism are not central to *English* poetry – or an *English* modernism – but European diversions instigated by the Americans Pound and Eliot (even if Hardy ‘showed the way for the imagists’).<sup>10</sup> Though Hardy didn’t start publishing poetry until 1898, after his last, ill-received novel *Jude the Obscure*, he had been writing it for many years. His influence as a poet is most strongly felt after 1910. For some he is a nature poet, for others he is a writer of the machine age; he is best known for the love poems of 1912–13 he wrote after the death of his estranged wife, Emma.

Though they are rarely discussed in overviews of these periods, both Kipling and Hardy were to continue writing poetry well into the interwar years, Kipling into the mid-1930s.<sup>11</sup> Neither was impressed by the changes twentieth-century ‘progress’ wrought. Hardy, looking back on the previous war, delivered this short bitter response to Christian hypocrisy at ‘Christmas: 1924’:

‘Peace upon earth!’ was said. We sing it,  
And pay a million priests to bring it.  
After two thousand years of mass  
We’ve got as far as poison-gas.

In 1932, Kipling wrote one prophetic poem, ‘The Storm Cone’, anticipating the coming wars:

Stand by! The lull ’twixt blast and blast  
Signals the storm is near, not past;  
And worse than present jeopardy  
May our forlorn to-morrow be.

Each with a volume of collected poems that stretches to a thousand pages, these prolific writers straddle the century’s threshold, and are Victorians in one sense, modernists in another.<sup>12</sup> They are also poets of World War I.<sup>13</sup> But Hardy and Kipling were established writers by 1900. Both were to have poor inheritors and imitators in the ensuing decade. The sense of community in Hardy and the sense of commonwealth in Kipling become unpleasant celebrations of the English ‘race’, its glorious history and supreme achievements. Hardy’s individuals and Kipling’s representatives become ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’, abstract ideals in which everyone can share but about whom, because of their artificial, conglomerate nature, nothing particular can be said. The

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emblem of this prewar period, blithely heading for social revolution or international war, seems to be the *Titanic*, full of Edwardian confidence but bound for disaster. Hardy's poem on the loss of the ship, 'The Convergence of the Twain', expresses this well:

And as the smart ship grew  
In stature, grace, and hue,  
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be:  
No mortal eye could see  
The intimate welding of their later history.

In the majority of literary histories, the hiatus in literary development early in the century is thought to have been challenged by the war poets and ended by the modernists. In his book, *Poetry as Discourse*, Antony Easthope (1983) claims that modernist poetry subverts traditional ways of reading poetry by eschewing use of the iamb. The argument runs that the iambic pentameter (think of Shakespeare's sonnets) has contributed to the notion of a speaking voice in poetry, which has led to the habitual identification of readers with the actual or implied 'I' of poems. Modernist poetry's emphasis on the signifier over the signified – on what words connote rather than denote – has disrupted this kind of identification, causing the reader to concentrate on form and dissonance rather than emotion and self-expression. Eliot famously wrote, contra Wordsworth, 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality' (Eliot 1972: 76). Easthope's theory is a variation on arguments put forward by formalists and Marxists early in the century, such as Victor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht, that the purpose of art is to make strange or to defamiliarise: only by distancing the reader from the objects and situations presented can literary techniques make people change their perceptions, and this is taken to be the chief purpose of art.<sup>14</sup> Along similar lines, Gary Day offers modern poetry, with its complexities and alternative narrative forms, as a subversive force (Day 1993: 8–9). He argues that, because of the mass media and its drive to create consumers, language has become increasingly institutionalised in the twentieth century, and that poetry has been able to counter this trend. Again, Day's argument actually resembles those of the modernists, such as Yeats and Eliot, that modern Western civilisation (or, as they would term it, democracy) has led to a devaluation of art and language. Eliot put it thus in *The Egoist* in 1918:

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What we want is to disturb and alarm the public.... [T]he intelligence of a nation must go on developing, or it will deteriorate.... That the forces of deterioration are a large crawling mass, and the forces of development half a dozen men.

As Stan Smith comments, citing this passage, the modernists thought: 'Democracy is the source of linguistic corruption, and therefore of social decay' (Smith 1983: 5). For Eliot, poetry was to be an antidote to this poison, but for the purposes of the present book, I would like simply to underline the way in which once more links are being forged between poetry and society.

I began this introduction by saying that critical practice involves a 'habit of reading'. To end, I would like to explain this a little more fully. All writing, and poetry especially so, is polysemic: it 'means' many different things. A poem exists in two senses at least: as an isolated collection of words, irrespective of any social context or any reader, and as the set of interpretations that are made of it. It is only in the latter sense however that the poem reaches us and is discussed by us – in *our* context, not in isolation. The American reader-response critic Stanley Fish coined the term 'interpretive community' to suggest the way in which a similarly educated group of people will have in common particular ideas and ways of reading texts, together with shared conscious beliefs and unconscious assumptions. Certain interpretations will gain currency within such a community and texts will therefore not generate meanings for them so much as fit into their conceptual models. In other words, texts come to have meanings within, and only within, contexts. The contexts for poetry in this book are history and society, and it is written with the conviction that this dimension to the study of poetry has been comparatively neglected, while such approaches to the novel have proliferated. This is in part for the reasons discussed at the start of this chapter, but perceptions of poetry's isolation and ahistorical condition are not conclusive, merely current habits of reading. To relate poetry to history is an alternative approach to interpretation, but it is also a dangerous enterprise, and we need to sound a note of caution:

The notion of a direct, spontaneous relation between text and history, then, belongs to a naive empiricism which is to be discarded.... The text can no more be conceived as directly denoting a real history than the meaning of a word can be imagined as an object correlated with it. Language, among other things, certainly denotes objects; but it does not do so in



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some simple relationship, as though word and object stood adjacent, as two poles awaiting the electric current of inter-connection.

(Eagleton 1976a: 70)

This book provides a starting point for reading twentieth-century British poetry alongside history, but readers are also encouraged further to problematise and interrogate both the complexities of language and the categories of literature and history themselves.<sup>15</sup>