

Modern and Contemporary Literature M. Phil.
Optional Course, Lent Term 2018

British and Irish Poetry since the 1960s

John Kerrigan

SCOPE

These seminars will investigate a period of extraordinary creativity and variety of practice, from the well-made lyrics of Ulster (Mahon, Longley, Heaney) to the experimentalism of Tom Raworth and Denise Riley and the soundscapes of Alice Oswald. Topics will range from the ecological to the urban modernist, taking in politics, sexuality, and translation. There will be an inclination to ask questions about the spatial, the geographical and the dislocated, not least because these are leading preoccupations in verse of the last half century.

My long engagement with new poetry—as a reader, reviewer, and essayist—has made my outlook inclusive. Too sharp a delineation of the field, or insistence on one sort of technique, narrows understanding. There is plenty of good mainstream work to be found (published by Faber, Picador, Cape) as there is both strong and ineffective late modernist poetry (Salt, Reality Street, Equipage). Some of the most interesting poets—Roy Fisher, Paul Muldoon, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin—cannot be readily classified, or have several modes of operation. My aim is primarily to explore with you the full range of contemporary poetry written in Britain and Ireland, or intersecting with it; but that brings with it a secondary obligation to introduce the debates and networks that have articulated its reception and have fed back into the conventions of production. This is best done without doctrinaire commitment to one or other way of writing.

I would consequently be happy to suggest many different kinds of reading for the seminars, to match the research-priorities and curiosity of participants. The list of options that follow is, for that reason, provisional. Seminar-by-seminar bibliographies will be provided once students have signed up and interests/needs are clearer. As far as possible, any critical reading will be downloadable in electronic form. Poetry will be made available on Moodle or by xerox, and first publication formats will in some cases be put into your hands in class. There will be close attention to poetic material but also encouragement to recover socio-historical and theoretical contexts.

Another word about geography. The British-Irish archipelago provides a viable structure for thinking about a great deal of writing from the 1960s to the present, but the poetry has often been shaped and cut across by larger, international contexts—American, Caribbean, European avant-garde, Irish/Gaelic, etc.—while the internet has changed the levels of accessibility and speed of interaction between writers, audiences and other writers, within world-wide English. So the framework for discussing British-Irish poetry in these seminars will be ‘transnational’, even when the work is very much home-grown, with attention given to poetry that was partly written as well as imaginatively located beyond the islands (e.g. in Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad)—work that is global in its awareness, and sometimes post-colonial.

PLAN

The first seminar will be called ‘Genesis’ but it could equally well be ‘Otters and Others’, since it looks at the emergence of nature poetry—specifically poetry about animals—in the ’60s. This was a cultural moment when the instinctual and the farouche—the legacy of D. H. Lawrence, not least in his animal poems—could be used to challenge what the poet and critic Al Alvarez called ‘the gentility principle’. In contrast with such poems as Ted Hughes’s ‘An Otter’ (1960), which begins to break out of 1950s conventions into human-animal wildness, we shall look at a modernist, would-be objective vision of the animal world in the naturalist-poet Colin Simms’ many poems about *Otters and Martens* (and goshawks and hen harriers). In Simms’ case the lines of influence run back to Basil Bunting, and so to Ezra Pound.

Between them, Hughes and Simms set parameters for writing in the ’60s and ’70s, and much can be learned from discussing that. There are, though, more far-reaching questions which have been revived in recent criticism. What does feminist sensibility do with this sort of poetry (cue poems by Maggie O’Sullivan and Alice Oswald)? How legitimate is anthropomorphic writing? How should we understand the shared biology of animals and humans, e.g. in relation to marking, mating, and traversing ground? Where does this leave the Ted Hughes of ‘Wodwo’ (1967), which tries to get inside a proto-human, bestial experience? How did hunting and observing animals contribute to the formation of ‘human’ nature? How ‘other’ is the animal? We shall think about environmental and anthropological work from the 1960s, but also about more recent arguments in animal studies and accounts of the post-human.

GENESIS

Primary material

Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber, 2008)

Ted Hughes, *A Ted Hughes Bestiary: Poems* (London: Faber, 2014), selected by Alice Oswald

Maggie O'Sullivan, *In the House of the Shaman* (1993)

Colin Simms, *Otters and Martens* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2004)

Contextual reading

John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?' and 'Field' (1980), rpt in his *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin, 2009)

Colin Simms, *The American Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2005)

Steven Connor, 'Thinking Perhaps Begins There: The Question of the Animal', *Textual Practice*, 21 (2007), 577-84

Maggie O'Sullivan, *Body of Work* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2006)

Oswald, Alice, *Falling Awake* (London: Faber, 2016)

Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 1996); available as e-book via UL.

Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (1927, often reprinted)

After this opening seminar, many directions and topics are possible. Seminars 2-6 might well, for instance, include 'Cities' (Roy Fisher, Ciarán Carson, Geraldine Monk, Jo Shapcott), 'Gender in Irish Poetry' (Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian), 'Caribs and Migrants' (Kamau Brathwaite, Grace Nichols, Vahni Capildeo), 'J. H. Prynne', 'Ecology' (Kathleen Jamie, John Kinsella, etc.), 'Experiments: Tom Raworth, Trevor Joyce', 'Faith and Style: Geoffrey Hill, Michael Symmons Roberts', 'Erotics: Carol Ann Duffy, Keston Sutherland, Vona Groarke, Kate Tempest', 'Experimental Poetry Written by Women in Britain' (the list is extensive), 'Glasgow, or Langwijn Poetry: Edwin Morgan, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Peter Manson', 'Performance', 'War: Christopher Logue, Tony Harrison, Alice Oswald, Andrea Brady'. The menu can be set out more narrowly and in detail as Lent term approaches, and any requests are made.

SUPERVISION

All students can claim at least a short supervision on draft or written work, but there will be plenty of access via e-mail or other one-to-one meetings if that is requested. This should be particularly useful for students who agree to give short presentations to the seminar, as ways of roughing out and developing their thoughts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(a) Some useful web resources:

<http://www.modernpoetry.org.uk/lists.html>

Archive of the Now

<http://www.archiveofthenow.org/>

Poetry Archive

<http://www.poetryarchive.org>

Jacket [archive]

<http://jacketmagazine.com/00/home.shtml>

Jacket2

<http://jacket2.org>

How2

<http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/>

Critical Documents

<http://www.plantarchy.us/home.html>

Prac crit

Praccrit.com

Penn Sound

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>

The Fortnightly Review

<http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk>

(b) Brutally short list of current magazines:

PN Review

Poetry Review

Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry

Cambridge Literary Review

(c) General reading:

Alderman, Nigel and C. D. Blanton, eds, *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)

Archambeau, Robert Thomas, *The Poet Resigns: Poetry in a Difficult World* (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2013)

Barry, Peter, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

Barry, Peter and Robert Hampson, eds, *The New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993)

Boland, Eavan, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Times* (New York: Norton, 1995)

Bristow, Tom, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Campbell, Matthew, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Clark, Heather, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Collins, Lucy, *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015)

Davidson, Ian, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (London: Palgrave, 2007)

Davidson, Ian, *Radical Spaces of Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010)

Davidson, Ian and Zoë Skoulding, eds, *Placing Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013)

Duncan, Andrew, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2003)

Falci, Eric, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

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Goodby, John, *Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

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Kennedy, David, and Christine Kennedy, *Women’s Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970–2010: Body, Time and Locale* (Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2013)

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The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994)

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