

# Barrier of a Common Language

*Dana Gioia*

Barrier of a  
Common Language

AN AMERICAN LOOKS  
AT CONTEMPORARY  
BRITISH POETRY

*Ann Arbor*

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*For Frederick Morgan and Paula Deitz  
Not merely great editors but absolute angels*

# Contents

Preface	ix
The Barrier of a Common Language: New British Poetry in the Eighties	1
The Rise of James Fenton	20
The Most Unfashionable Poet Alive (Charles Causley)	37
Home Is So Sad (Philip Larkin)	59
The Two Wendy Copes	64
Short Views	
Ted Hughes	73
Kingsley Amis	75
Tony Connor	78
Dick Davis	82
Thom Gunn	84
Charles Tomlinson	86
The Novelist as Poet (Anthony Burgess)	90
Donald Davie's Imaginary Museum	97
Index	105

## Preface

“I feel very much the need to be on the periphery of things.”

—Philip Larkin

The essays in this book grew out of a conviction that American and English poetry remain inextricably connected. While this belief is hardly controversial, it is a notion now more honored in the breach than the observance—at least in regard to contemporary poetry. In America the literary curriculum is still largely based on the chronological survey of English-language texts from Beowulf and Chaucer to the present (with a few translations of Greek classics—usually just Homer and Sophocles—added for historical perspective). In this pedagogic model British poetry enjoys a monopoly until the mid-nineteenth century when Americans suddenly achieve equal billing. The two poetics maintain an uneasy balance for about a hundred years. Then in the decades after the Second World War British poetry—like the British Empire itself—seems suddenly to be swept away and vanishes. The story of English-language poetry, therefore, implicitly concludes with American verse triumphant and all-powerful. A stirring tale perhaps but not an accurate one.

The reasons for British poetry’s vanishing act are both practical and political. In practical terms, there is so much contemporary verse to read that American teachers, critics, and anthologists justifiably feel a need to focus their efforts. In such a situation their own country’s efforts tend to receive priority. In political terms, there has long been a sense of triumphalism in the study of modern American poetry. Although the notion is rarely articulated openly, there is a tacit assumption in most anthologies and criticism that in the past century American poetry—vigorous, innovative, and bold—decisively vanquished its

safe, tired, and tame British counterpart. (In the American account, only Irish poets escaped the general holocaust. Canadians, Australians, South Africans, and other Anglophonic poets don't even merit a mention.) Modernism was the glory of American verse, the story runs, and the future belongs to us.

Recently the multicultural movement has critiqued some elements of American literary triumphalism, but its remedy was not a rapprochement with contemporary British writing. Instead, the answer was to incorporate postcolonial English-language works, especially from the Third World, into literary and academic culture—a sensible strategy but an incomplete one. This effort has succeeded in adding some notable African, Caribbean, and Asian writers to the canon, though few of them are poets, but it leaves the English issue unanswered. What is the current relationship between American poetry and that of our language's Mother country?

The effects of the gradual but drastic break between the American and British poetic traditions are many, but the most obvious and pernicious has been simple ignorance. American literati no longer read new British poetry. American anthologists rarely include contemporary works from the United Kingdom. Poetic reputations now seldom cross the Atlantic. Consequently, knowledgeable American readers of contemporary poetry often don't even recognize the names of living British poets. Usually the only English poets who achieve much literary fame in America are the ones like Thom Gunn and Geoffrey Hill, who resettle here. (This strategy, however, has not yet been equally successful for Tony Connor and Dick Davis.) For someone like myself, who believes there are many enormously accomplished British poets writing at present, this neglect seems both unfortunate and unnecessary.

When I first noticed this situation nearly thirty years ago, I assumed it was temporary. No powerful new generation had yet appeared to challenge the eminence of older masters like Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, Basil Bunting, and Robert Graves. But when exciting new poets like Tony Harrison, James Fenton, and Wendy Cope arrived to rapturous receptions in the U.K., they remained largely invisible here. There was simply too much domestic literary activity competing for the reader's limited time

and attention. There also seemed to be a general sense that nothing the Brits did now mattered much to American poetry. I have been particularly struck by how few American poets read or discuss their British counterparts. And how fewer still ever write about them. Of the American poet-critics in my generation probably only William Logan has consistently written on current British verse.

There is much to be said in favor of reading contemporary British poetry, but let two arguments suffice for the moment. The first is pleasure. I find it hard to imagine that any avid reader who sat down for an hour with a volume by Larkin, Fenton, Cope, Kingsley Amis, or Charles Causley would not rise delighted and refreshed. English poets have not lost their talent to entertain as well as to move and enlighten. Donald Davie once claimed that the key difference between English and American poets is a sense of audience. Americans, he maintained, write from a profound sense of isolation. The English never doubt that they address an audience, however small. That sense of community often gives British poetry a companionable or public quality that seems slightly foreign but also restorative to an American. That same sense of an audience also accounts for the humor that characterizes so much of the best modern British poetry—from Thomas Hardy and A. E. Housman through W. H. Auden and Philip Larkin. It is not necessarily an easy humor. More often it is the bitter satire found in Hardy, Larkin, or Anthony Burgess, but this particularly English sensibility recognizes the need to make a dark worldview attractive to contemplate. “Deprivation is for me,” joked Larkin, “what daffodils were for Wordsworth.” That self-deprecating remark is not only both a good joke and ruthlessly honest self-criticism; it is also a comment no major American poet would have made. American bards are more likely to echo Walt Whitman, “I celebrate myself, and sing myself.” Both literary strategies can produce magnificent results, but they are irreconcilably different.

The second argument in favor of reading new British verse is perspective. British poetry is a foreign literature that Americans can read in the original. Even if they have grown apart in the past 150 years, British and American poetry share the same root stock. Nourished by the same sources, they both resemble and

differ from one another in interesting and significant ways. To see what British poets take from American literature teaches us something about ourselves, just as understanding what currently fashionable ideas they ignore challenges our own aesthetic assumptions. Aside from its strictly artistic achievements, British poetry can be studied as a laboratory testing the imaginative possibilities of the contemporary English language.

The essays in this book were written mostly with the purpose of introducing some interesting new poets to an American audience. Many of the essays reflect a spirit of advocacy—an attempt to make a compelling case for the reader’s attention. I have had the considerable advantage of writing here mostly about poets I admire. Advocacy and admiration, however, are no substitutes for critical candor and objectivity, so I have often discussed a particular poet’s failings as well as his or her achievements. Such mixed evaluations seem to infuriate some readers, who want an author praised (or attacked) unreservedly. It is silly, however, to insist that a critic must accept or reject a poet’s total *oeuvre* rather than judging each individual work by its particular merits. Few writers manage a consistently high level of accomplishment. (Even Larkin’s astonishing consistency of achievement was qualified once his unpublished and uncollected verse was presented.) And some genuinely important poets like Graves and Hughes were so prolific and uneven that they can best be championed selectively. Even in advocacy, a critic’s task is not to praise but to praise rightly.

I wrote the essays and reviews that make up this book over the past twenty years—not intending at first to collect them in a single volume. Once I put them together, I then painstakingly rewrote several of the essays both to incorporate new material and to refine their arguments. Distracted by other obligations, I worked so slowly that I was sure similar volumes would supersede my study of contemporary British poetry. I am both sorry and surprised to say that I was wrong. Two or three scholarly volumes have discussed the older generation of British poets, but no American poet-critic has yet to publish a similar survey. However brief and belated, this book still fills a necessary gap.