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*Contemporary British Poetry
and the Long 1980s*

Introduction

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This special issue is devoted to contemporary British poetry and the cultural, political, and aesthetic legacies of the “long 1980s.” It takes as its point of departure Sean O’Brien’s 1995 hypothesis on the deregulation of poetry, formulated against the backdrop of Thatcherite economics and the wider turn to neoliberalism. While Thatcher famously insisted that “there is no alternative,” the British poetry of the period and its aftermath have been marked by an insistence on alternatives: a proliferation of forms, voices, and aesthetics that both respond to and resist the dominant culture.

The essays collected here explore whether this “deregulation” has fostered poetic innovation—in terms of diction, prosody, rhythm, and form—or whether it has fragmented the field into self-regulating niches, each defined by its own conventions and exclusions. They also examine the institutional, editorial, and cultural contexts that have shaped poetic production since the 1980s, and reflect on questions of authority, diversity, and marginalisation on the poetry scene. Together, the contributions reassess the ways in which deregulation has served as both an enabling and a constraining force in British poetry, illuminating its continuities, its ruptures, and its ongoing negotiation with the long 1980s.

KEYWORDS: *Contemporary British poetry, 1980s, deregulation, Thatcherism and neoliberalism, aesthetic innovation and diversity*

In 2015, Andrew McMillan's *Physical* became the first book of poetry to win the *Guardian* First Book Award. Mostly set in McMillan's native Yorkshire, the poems explore themes of masculinity and queerness in the context of the post-industrial North. Ghosts of the 1980s haunt the book—in addition to placing the collection under the patronage of Thom Gunn's poems of the AIDS crisis, McMillan evokes the celebrations that took place in South Yorkshire following the death of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In "The Schoolboys," the speaker, who is on a train back from those celebrations, describes a scene in which a lady looks disapprovingly at two boys sitting too close to each other:

they briefly mention Thatcher and the town

that came together for a party they
 didn't understand the point of
 [...]

she stares out the window maybe thinking
 of her son by now a man she goes red
 she focuses on a headline rising
 unemployment lack of manual jobs
 the boys move seats two others wrestle
 to impress the girls the boys sit closer
 than they need to the lady burns (McMillan 9)

The final words have a punchline quality, linking the woman's casual bigotry—and perhaps homophobia—to the reviled figure of the Iron Lady. The speaker's framing of this moment highlights a form of gleeful but quiet resistance to the legacy of conservative violence inflicted on the North of England. But it also clearly connects a history of resistance to neoliberal economic destruction with a form of defiant queer visibility. In that sense, McMillan both rejects and celebrates the presence of the 1980s in his community, suggesting that his poetry is engaged in an ongoing reflection on the era as a turning point.

In the introduction to his collection of essays *The Deregulated Muse* (1998), poet and critic Sean O'Brien draws a connection between the "variousness of contemporary poetry" in Britain, "which seems to prevent, or at any rate dispute, the emergence of a dominant line," and the social, political, and economic movement of "deregulation" (O'Brien 9). O'Brien suggests that the 1980s' neoliberal turn in Britain is linked to a redrawing of the map of British poetry, one that widened the range of poetic creativity while also dismantling the landmarks traditionally used to appraise the "value" of poetry. This volume seeks to assess some aspects of that turn and trace its multiple (and often contradictory) developments in British poetic writing since the 1980s.

Many critics have described the story of British poetry since the late 1970s as one of increasing openness. A case in point is Terry Eagleton's assessment of the 1980s in *Poetry Review*, in which he sees "the marginal becom[ing] somehow central" (Eagleton 46). O'Brien also alludes to the increased visibility of poetry produced by unheard or marginalised voices in Britain during the 1980s and early 1990s: regional voices, poetry by women and feminist poets, as well as work by Black and Asian British poets became more audible in the period. Resistance to the conservative backlash of the 1980s and its social atomisation also encouraged more overtly political poetry. This, in turn, affected the nature of poetry itself, with Dub and Punk poetry, for instance, challenging the boundaries between the poem, performance, and even songwriting.

Introducing their 1993 anthology *The New Poetry*, Michael Hulse, David Kennedy, and David Morley identify and praise a "pluralism of poetic voice[s]," which they associate with Britain's growing awareness of its multiculturalism. In 2012, Fiona Sampson's *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* continues this narrative, describing a period "of tremendous richness and variety," while also introducing another thread: the growing alignment with North American verse, marked by the importation of high-profile BAME poets, the rise of prose poetry, and a shift from lyrical forms to the long line. This increased North American influence, of course, corresponds with the broader cultural hegemony of the United States during this era—another key feature of the neoliberal period.

Moreover, the development of new technologies, especially since the turn of the millennium and the near-universal access to the Internet in Britain, has opened up new venues for poetry beyond the page or stage. To what extent has this transformed the composition, transmission, and reception of poetry? Spoken word, performance, digital, and video poetries have flourished on social media and platforms like Dailymotion, SoundCloud, Instagram, or YouTube, significantly increasing poetry's audience in the UK. The presence of poetry online has also enhanced its role in public discourse, particularly in response to major crises—terrorist attacks, Brexit, the MeToo movement, the Grenfell Tower fire, or, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic. Online dissemination has made poetry more readily accessible to new audiences, including people living far from the UK's mostly urban poetry scenes and disabled readers and poets.

However, this increased public visibility of poetry from the 1980s onward seems to align with market imperatives and the demands of self-promotion. While Thatcher proclaimed that "there is no alternative" (TINA) to economic liberalism, British poetry has claimed an increasing range of aesthetic alternatives. Yet, the growing volume of poetry published has arguably led to an erosion of consensus about what constitutes an authoritative voice.

In this context, one might question public poetic roles such as the Poet Laureateship or the Oxford Professorship of Poetry. Have they preserved authoritative voices, or have they adapted? Similarly, can the rise of poetry prizes be understood as a response to this deregulation? Do they provide platforms for formally innovative poetry and smaller independent presses? Or have they narrowed

the field by focusing on individual figures sanctioned by the literary establishment? More broadly, has the questioning of all forms of poetic authority and centrality led to a self-regulation of the poetic field? Has this fostered more innovation and poetic freedom, or created more pressure for poets to carve out niches within the poetry market? Are we still living in the wake of the 1980s' aesthetic deregulation?

This volume opens with an interview with acclaimed poet, biographer, and critic Fiona Sampson. She discusses the impact of Thatcher's neoliberal turn and Blair's *Cool Britannia* on the poetry scene, the material conditions of poetic creation in the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of the New Generation poets, and the influence of poet-editors Don Paterson and Robin Robertson in the 1990s and 2000s. She also argues that the particular conditions of the long 1980s have diversified poetic voices and fragmented the scene into competing schools—yet positively, this fragmentation has created space for new voices to emerge. The articles that follow expand on some of the issues Sampson raises.

For instance, **Eva Zettelmann** offers a broad analysis of the impact of the 1980s' neoliberal turn on the British poetry scene. She argues that the increasing integration of market logics led to a focus on accessibility as a core value, creating a rift between innovative and mainstream poetries. Her wide-ranging overview of seemingly disparate trends focuses on self-help anthologies, prize-oriented poems, and poetic works centred on cultural memory. She suggests that the pressures of an increasingly crowded literary market have led mainstream poetry to embrace a form of “lyric utilitarianism,” relying on familiarising strategies, social utility, and a conception of language as a mostly transparent medium for truth.

Adriano Elia continues this exploration of “useful” poetry by examining Roger Robinson's *A Portable Paradise* (2019), echoing Zettelmann's concerns. Through free association, Elia explores the poet's multifaceted influences and shows how Robinson challenges stereotypes of Black Britishness and Caribbean identity to evoke empathy in his readers.

Picking up on Sampson's observation of new forms of lyrical writing, **John Sannaec** explores a “return to the lyric” in recent British poetry by BAME and marginalised voices. Examining poets like Caleb Femi, Raymond Antrobus, and Liz Berry, he argues that these writers use the lyric to create “an intersubjective relationship grounded in real-life experience.” He traces their work to Romantic traditions and he finishes by examining the work of spoken word practitioners Kae Tempest and Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan to suggest that their new lyricism situates itself within a broader international trend.

Michael Hinds focuses on another form of lyricism: the musical and poetic response of Sleaford Mods to neoliberalism under Thatcher and New Labour, with particular attention to the song “Jobseeker.” Beginning with the band's poetics of disillusion—as part of an English tradition of subcultural discontent—Hinds draws on concepts such as the metrics-based economy, the mathematization of the body, the commodification of citizens, the reconstruction of selfhood, and polyvocality. His analysis concludes by highlighting the band's paradoxically Thatcherite contempt for modes of state intervention.

In a highly personal essay combining computer-assisted creative writing and song analysis, **Iain Halliday** also addresses the concept of deregulation, as described by Sean O'Brien in *The Deregulated Muse* (1998), in order to explore the boundary between song lyrics and poetry from the 1980s to the present.

Moving from lyrics to chant, **Laure-Hélène Anthony-Gerroltdt** argues that the contemporary treatment of the figure of the witch bridges the gap between the feminist movements of the 1960s–1980s—which focused on conceptualising patriarchy through the claim that the personal is political—and 21st-century movements, which open up to a plurality of marginalised voices. She therefore delineates the multifaceted figure of the witch as a symbol of change and justice, focusing on the politics of the body and the stylistic use of the pronoun “you” in two collections: Rebecca Tamás’s *WITCH* (2019) and Claire Askew’s *How to Burn a Woman* (2021).

The politics of the body is also central to **Julie Irigaray’s** article. Drawing on sociology, reception studies, and close reading, she begins by acknowledging that a plurality of voices—most notably BAME and LGBTQ+ poets—began to emerge from the 1980s onwards. However, she argues that disabled poets and those affected by chronic illness had to wait until the COVID-19 pandemic—when successive lockdowns forced poets, networks, and publishers to become online entrepreneurs—to witness a real reconfiguration of the poetic scene that significantly broadened their opportunities. From the pragmatics of accessibility to its poetics, Irigaray shows that the deregulation of the poetry market, even under dire circumstances, had a positive impact on the visibility of a marginalised group of poets.

Sarah Bouttier contends that deregulation in the 1980s introduced the theme of fluidity—of capital, of people, and of poetic forms—which has since become a recurring poetic motif. She examines Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo’s *Venus as a Bear* (2018) to explore how their poetics of fluidity opens onto a “wet ontology.” To do so, Bouttier employs close reading, ecocriticism, and new materialism to interrogate two central paradoxes: how can the nonhuman be represented through the inherently human medium of language? And can fluidity ever fully relinquish materiality?

The articles in this volume attempt to address the lasting impact of a key moment in British cultural history on poetry. They aim to provide insights into how this deregulated aesthetics has shaped contemporary British poetry, and where it might be headed. While they do not seek definitive answers, they offer a wide range of perspectives and case studies on the recent past and present of British poetry.

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