Good poetry has a way of eluding even the most credible generalizations and critical labels. Despite everything I've said so far, *New British Poetry* is still a book of distinct individual voices. It displays an astonishing range of styles and an equal number of ways in which a poem can succeed. The poems in this anthology prove wrong any dogmatic aesthetic position, formalist or avant-garde, which claims to be in the possession of the ingredients and the recipe out of which superior poems are made. Most of the poets here are scavengers, free to appropriate what they need from very different kinds of poetries. The eclecticism of American poetry probably had something to do with that since living with contradictions is our national specialty. Whatever the case may be, the originality and sheer mastery to be found in this anthology is bound to restore anyone's belief in literature. If you haven't read Carol Ann Duffy, Simon Armitage, Michael Hofmann, Jo Shapcott, Alice Oswald, Christopher Reid, Gillian Allnutt, and Jamie McKendrick—to name only a few poets included here—your life, I'm tempted to say, has not been as interesting as it deserves to be. The purpose of this anthology is to remedy that without further delay.

Charles Simic

Introduction

I

British poetry is different from North American poetry. This essay is an attempt firstly to describe that difference; to give some description of the current UK scene and its schisms; to discuss the threat currently presented by the Postmoderns and their general ubiquity, and give some defence of 'Mainstream' practise; and to give a brief account of how this book was put together. All this, I should hastily add, comes from one very partisan—if not, I hope, wholly unreliable—witness. However one-sided an affair certain readers may find it, I can reassure them I have even less talent for the disinterested overview.

Some cultural commentators on the other side of the Atlantic still talk—on those rare occasions they do talk about such things—as if UK poetry were still stuck in some Georgian or Victorian timewarp. The implication is always that our poetry, somehow, either failed to keep pace with the rest of the English-speaking world in its development of the Modernist vision, or that there was something too fragile in our national temperament for the revolution it proposed; whatever Oedipal psychodrama continues to fuel this prejudice has long ceased to be interrogated.

Understandably stung by this, certain British critics have perhaps devoted too much energy to emphasising the similarities between UK and US poetries, and have gone to great pains to point out that we too have our Postmoderns, radicals, and experimentalists. It might have been less disingenuous, however, to concede that there was a grain of truth in this perception of us: the majority of the poetry actually *read* in the UK tends, quite simply, to demonstrate an allegiance to more traditional ideas of form and poetic closure than its more freewheeling, loose-lined, and open-ended North American equivalent—and

perhaps also to the pure lyric, in the simplest and neutral sense of an abiding interest in the old song-forms.

The reason is fairly straightforward: Modernism fed into British poetry as a new, invigorating tributary to the river of the old tradition. In the main (that *main* we will soon have to define), it did not present itself as the revolutionary alternative it was for the US, with its concomitant assertion of cultural independence. The new formal and imaginative possibilities won by Eliot and Pound were, in the work of Auden, McNeice, and their school, already maturely assimilated by the 1930s—and Pound's more extreme call-to-arms in the later Cantos largely ignored. True, there was a black spot in the 1940s and early '50s, when the florid operatics of Dylan Thomas and a sudden and belated acquaintance with Stevens's *Harmonium* proved immediately fatal to several smaller talents (who failed to remember that the greats are great *despite* their stylistic excesses, not because of them); it also proved briefly detrimental to some very considerable ones, notably W. S. Graham and Norman McCaig. But for the most part, the new and the old came fairly quickly to a happy accommodation. As a result, there has never been the need for such brutal correctives as the 'New Formalist' movement in the UK. (Rather sweetly, the editor of a Scottish magazine with a vaguely formal bias received a letter a couple of years ago from an American poet offering his congratulations on the fact that the New Formalism had finally 'reached' Scotland.) New Formalism tends to be regarded by the majority of informed UK readers as every bit as bizarre a poetic strategy as those proposed by the Postmoderns and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets; primarily since they both appear to engage seriously with the false and very un-British paradigm of artistic progress—and even less palatably, to provide the adherents of either school a way of indicating a conservative or radical political allegiance. In contrast, then, the course of 'mainstream' poetry over the last century in the UK can be read as a relatively seamless evolution.

Mainstream: a river with tributaries. This, for better or worse, is a mainstream anthology. I'd like to see the word reclaimed from our detractors, though to do so, we should first make some attempt at a definition. In the US, one might caricature the mainstream as that

broad swathe of poets who have strung their elegant steps together between the clumping clog-dance of the New Formalists from the school of Yvor Winters onwards, and the neurotic ballet of the Postmoderns, from the later Cantos and the school of Charles Olson onwards: i.e., from that pool of writers who would include Roethke, Lowell, and Bishop to Anthony Hecht, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, Louise Glück, Gertrude Schnackenberg, C. K. Williams, Jorie Graham, Marilyn Hacker, Charles Simic, Mark Doty, and the apparently unforgivably popular Billy Collins. In the UK, the mainstream has been shaped and narrowed by the closing banks of that cheery and generally none-too-clever verse of recognition humour or undisguised moral exhortation; and by the Postmoderns on the other—and how strenuously Left—bank. However, as I hope this book will show, it has been narrowed to a fairly furious and articulate torrent.

Many of the poets in this book would, I suspect, despise the vanilla overtones of the word 'mainstream'. Worse—for those of us from poorer or working-class backgrounds, the news that you were going to dedicate your life to writing serious verse was received by the community with the same panic as might be your departure for Bader-Meinhof or a transexual circus. The idea of us being described as 'mainstream' anything still fills us with a kind of demonically unbalanced hilarity. These misgivings apart, though, it still seems the most accurate designation available.

While this book will be wrongly interpreted by some as putting itself forward as a corrective to the Postmodern revisionism of such recent anthologies as Keith Tuma's controversial *Oxford Book of British Verse*, it is, nonetheless, an alternative. However unrepresentative an account some will rightly feel *New British Poetry* to be, it can claim to be a more accurate map in at least the following way: all the poets collected here have been drawn from the set of British poets who still sell books to a general—i.e., non-practising and non-academic—readership. This is not for one moment to deny the importance of those other readerships. However, a poetry which has lost its general audience will, before long, start to smack of the thesis or the in-house memorandum; it will have suffered, whichever way you cut it, a serious cultural demotion.

For this reason, British poetry is occasionally described as 'populist'. This tends to mean no more than that it actively seeks an audience, often uses traditional forms, and considers itself primarily a kind of public art (with all the obligations to 'entertain', in the widest sense, that implies, whatever private meditations or epiphanies lie behind it). Popular, though, it isn't. By the standards of almost all other forms of literature, our sales are poor—perhaps a couple of thousand or a few hundred per book. Compared with the novel, poetry tends to enjoy very little in the way of support from publicity and marketing departments, bookstore reps, and the booksellers themselves; when these books do sell, they tend to do so largely by recommendation in the press or by word of mouth. This pays the books, I think, a considerable compliment.

This dwindling readership should not be interpreted (as has been the frequent diagnosis) as a sign that the non-metropolitans, the working classes, the ethnic minorities, or—heaven help us—'the kids' find poetry irrelevant and inaccessible. These groups are disenfranchised in many more serious ways than their mere alienation from contemporary literature, which is a only a side-symptom of a far more broad and concerted cultural indifference. As far as poetry itself is concerned, the news is far worse: it's a sign that poetry's own natural constituency has itself been alienated and lost along the way. By this I mean simply a literate and educated readership capable of responding to the demands the average contemporary poem asks of them. (Contrary to the persistent liberal dogma—'middle', in the UK, is now a class almost as frequently attained as inherited.) Lest some misread this as an argument for cultural elitism—of *course* poetry must be allowed to reach the poorer inner cities, the prisons and the factory floors; though when it does, it inevitably arrives via some patronising mediation, some strategy intended to make it 'easier': a visit from a performance poet, or a themed workshop, or a poster campaign with the dumbest, shortest poem the committee can find, set in 50-point bold; rarely anything so straightforward as restocking the school library, or handing out books to leave lying around the canteen. But to have made, in the course of our numerous awareness-raising campaigns, no direct appeal to the serious-fiction-reading,

theatregoing, art-movie-viewing public—i.e., one already receptive to some level of difficulty or complexity in the art they enjoyed—was surely a grievous error.

At the other end of the scale, the potential audience for British poetry is further attenuated by the indifferent and sometimes catastrophic teaching of poetry in schools, and the consequent failure to develop a new generation of readers. Despite the fact that the poem is the only art form that you can appropriate wholesale, and then carry around in your head in its original form, the only art whose every element of composition also performs some mnemonic function—the practice of learning of poems by heart has all but disappeared; one still hears it regularly decried as if it were some kind of Victorian torment. But what greater gift could you devise for a child than a piece of high art that's literally theirs to keep forever? There are, of course, pockets of articulate resistance in the teaching profession (and a great deal of sterling educational work is done by both the British Poetry Society and Poetry Book Society); but such poetry as is taught is mostly imparted with little enthusiasm or understanding. At secondary level the discussion of poetry tends to take place only in the context of rudimentary critical analysis, with its ignorant and misplaced obsession with 'meaning'—'meaning' being something the poet has gone out of their clever way to obscure but, through some quixotic literary courtesy, left behind enough clues to allow the reader to partially decode it.

What, in the end, has been bargained away is the idea that a great poem has some intrinsic cultural value that need not be validated by any other means than its simple *reading*. Poetry is lousy decoration, a lousy way of carrying information, mostly a lousy collaborative partner, and is good for very little but itself. It should perhaps be no surprise, in our ultra-utilitarian age, that it has been among the first casualties.

What we do have in the UK, however, is a media still prepared to support the art. We may sometimes carp about the content and presentation, but this carping is a real luxury; poetry still has considerable popular exposure in the UK. We have a couple of national radio programs dedicated solely to poetry, and several arts magazine

programs which feature and review it regularly; we can still rely on the majority of our books to be reviewed in the press, eventually; National Poetry Day and the various award ceremonies still generate considerable media coverage; and when Tony Harrison, or the current Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, writes an anti-war poem condemning UK and US foreign policy, it appears the next day on the front page of one of the biggest dailies. (We must set against this the somehow terribly millennial spectacle of '100 Poets Against the War'—eventually boosted to around 1,500 Poets Against the War, which would seem to undermine the usefulness of the designation 'poet', but no matter—whose strategy, in the end, was to suggest we flood the intrays of our politicians with thousands of unread e-books. Again, reinforcing the idea that poetry itself could be of no *use*, but in sufficient bulk might be employed as a kind of electronic gunge.) There is still a powerful sense in the UK that, despite having lost much of its core readership, poetry can and should matter. Mercifully it seems that the urge to be assuaged or comforted or inspired or galvanised into action by a poem will be hardwired in the human brain for a lot longer than those few generations whose dereliction almost seems like a deliberate attempt to destroy it.

II

One flourishing group, though, would be happy to see the Mainstream disappear overnight, were it not for the fact that their treasured outsider status would then be wholly undermined. I refer, of course, to the aforementioned Postmoderns. (The North American reader is invited to think also of their own Postmoderns for the next few pages; I suspect most of what follows will apply equally well.) They are unrepresented here. While any assessment of their individual merits would have been both a more and less tolerant affair than what follows, unlike the Mainstream, they have gone to great lengths to present themselves as a distinct tribe—one unified by the usual tactics, principally the systematic denigration of those unlike themselves. It therefore seems fair to attempt some rough adumbration of their common aesthetic; more importantly, I think this will be

especially useful in throwing the work and working practise of the UK Mainstream into some relief.

Amongst the UK Postmoderns are a handful of attractive voices who—had they not felt obliged to continually affect the terminal seriousness and atonality of the Po-mo School Song (as we know, even their play must be serious; *especially* their play)—would surely have flourished in the Mainstream. Mostly, though, their work is incomprehensible. One can no longer say 'incomprehensible rubbish', for incomprehension is no longer the undesirable reader-response it used to be. Incomprehension now has its aficionados, its exegetes, and its champions, who are able to detect as many shades of confusion as Buddhists do the absolute. By 'incomprehension' I don't mean a reaction to 'difficulty' or 'strangeness'; strangeness and difficulty abound in the Mainstream. I refer to that special category of difficulty *whose sensible interpretation or interpretations cannot be confirmed or validated by the text to any satisfactory degree*; and those strangenesses that cannot even be identified as such, because they have no unexceptional context. Their oft-repeated aim that the work should 'involve the reader in the production of meaning' sounds like a novel formulation; it is, of course, the identical aim of the Mainstream, who see the reader as equal collaborator in the creation of the poem. The work of the Postmoderns *delegates* the production of meaning to the reader, their poetry being largely derelict in its responsibility to aid it. The reader is alone. For those of us quickly bored by our own company, the result is work that can be objectively described as extremely boring.

The Modernists were frustrated by the limitations of poetic diction and the received forms; the epigones of the great Modernists were oppressed by metre; now the Postmodern poet finds himself bound hand and foot by finite meaning. Anything short of absolute polysemy is in danger, apparently, of limiting the interpretative possibilities of the text. (And worse—of casting the reader in a role subordinate to that of the poet. This latter point is perhaps the more crucial, since, besides the captive audience of their students, the Postmoderns only have other Postmoderns as their readers.) As a

result, one halfway comprehensible line will stand out, and is often hailed as, an epiphany, a wisdom, or a great literary bravery.

It is also painfully apparent that far too few of them—on the evidence of such useful surveys as Denise Riley's "Poets on Writing"—have anything approaching what the Mainstream would recognise as a real compositional procedure, i.e., some subjective way of verifying their own line-to-line success, and hence its possible reciprocal success in the mind of the reader. No: they have systems. But if there's a common aesthetic that could be identified in *New British Poetry*, it's this: these poems, we believe, make a honest attempt to generate the literal or argumentative context by which they are to be understood. (Less an aesthetic, I'd propose, and more an act of human courtesy.) A fact too often unappreciated is that *lineation alone* indicates the presence of figure. The line's falling short of the right margin—its leaving so much white space—advertises the fact that *this is a poem*; the poem, even in the understanding of children, being a small thing that stands for a bigger thing, and possessing a deeper or broader significance than its simple prose sense might first suggest. In other words the reader, at the mere confrontation with the line, has already begun to create a fruitful difficulty for themselves, to *read in*.

The poets in *New British Poetry*, I believe, understand this relationship and calculate for it; they attempt to reward the reader for their investment. And since the poem is an act of collusion, the superimposition of a new intelligence and life-experience on the poem will result in an unique interference pattern of agreement and ambiguity for each new reader. 'Difficulty', then, is twice written into the contract—once by the reader, who is already at work unpacking the freight of the poem, whether it exists or not; and again by the poet, who is trying to shock the reader into a brief moment of wakefulness by saying something original, something they had not said before, in a way they believe no one had said before . . . how could such a statement be anything other than initially unfamiliar? Given this, the wilful addition of further confusion and disorientation seems an odd project, and an effortlessly easy one to pursue. Difficulty and figure, in the traditional lyric poem, are where the differences of interpretation will lie. These very ambiguities often grant the reader the freedom to have that part of the poem *they have grounded in finite literal sense* find some emotional resonance within their individual life-experience. 'Literal sense' playing little part in the Postmodern game, the freedoms their poets grant to the reader are almost infinite, and therefore, by any commonsense standard, worthless.

The Mainstream poets in this book are part of a long evolution, and are engaged in an open, complex and ongoing dialogue with the whole of the English lyric tradition. Despite their claims to do the same, the Postmoderns are unable to configure their relationship with this tradition, because their individual style (or, more accurately, the by-product of what they variously call 'method', 'praxis', and 'research'; though in each case it only amounts to an alternative strategy of evasion) must everywhere declare the primacy of *novelty*, since they see themselves purely in terms of a progressive vanguard—interestingly, just about the only criticism one ever hears the Postmoderns clearly articulate against the work of other Postmoderns is its failure to 'innovate'. Their plan is evolutionary succession, not cohabitation. But astonishment, in the mind of the reader, always works from the familiar to the unfamiliar, as gravity works from the ground up. There must always be a little of the quotidian to contextualise the omen, shock or surprise. The Mainstream poem attempts to hold the known and unknown in a fine internal balance; with the Postmoderns, all we get is a litany of exceptions. Not only can such a poem never surprise the reader—whatever conversations it thinks it might be engaged in, it cannot be in dialogue with *any* tradition—anything, indeed, but its own linguistic whim. The poets in this book are concerned with originality, not novelty; by which I suppose I mean, ultimately, the startling reincarnation of the old truths in the culture of the age.

In that definition of originality they find their *risk*. 'Risk' in poetry has nothing to do with the ampersand-count, or disjunctive syntax, or heaps of nonseqs, or sly allusions to Heisenberg or Heidegger, or novel systems of punctuation. Attempts at *real* originality run the risk of neither nonsense nor obscurity, but mundanity. Truly

original expression—since it must be already half-familiar to be verified as such—always runs the risk of cliché; the clear articulation of deep emotion always runs the risk of sentimentality; and taking the chance of being largely understood always runs the risk of being found to be talking a pile of garbage. These are the sort of braver risks the poets in this book run all the time, and where they occasionally come unstuck. By contrast, the Postmoderns cannot fail in their project; only their readers can fail them, so they need not acknowledge anything so simple as the success-failure axis in their own practise. Indeed such a culture could never evolve and calibrate the critical tools necessary to measure failure in the first place: they are quick to claim their successes and proclaim their geniuses, but (unlike the Mainstream, who do so as a hobby) cannot point to examples of *disastrous* practise within their genre, since there is little interpreted sense to agree on that might form the basis for such a judgement. Whereas the reader's relationship to the Mainstream poem is actually very simple: we read; we either understand something or nothing; if nothing, we read no further; if something, we say—*I've heard this; this is untrue; this could've been put better*; or *this amazes, moves, provokes, or informs me.*

The Mainstream persist with the flawed currency of sense and idiom, knowing that this is all we have. ('Flawed' simply in the sense of Antonio Porchia's *I know what I have given you; I do not know what you have received.*) The Postmoderns have dispensed with the ground of consensual meaning, and have substituted systems, patterns, and the retrospective justification of the caprice for the mastery of technique and form. As a result their lines are often as clean and uncriticisable as serial composition; but their emotional palette is so meagrely provided, it leaves them capable of nothing more than a monotone angst, an effete and etiolated aestheticism, and a kind of joyless wordplay that somehow passes, in their country, for wit. Their claim to serious political engagement is wholly incompatible with their clear disregard of such tediously practical matters as exclusivity of register and reader-constituency. The Mainstream, on the other hand, remain deeply engaged with the messy business of communication with a real critical readership—a extremely vulnerable situation, fraught with all manner of self-consciousness dangers: self-impersonation, second-guessing, dumbing down, sexing up, comedy, gratuitous displays of learning and allusion—in other words, the inadvertent projection and amplification of their own social neuroses, against which they must be constantly vigilant. This dialogue is open-ended; by contrast, the self-absorbed, closed-system expressionism of the Po-mos mark them out as some kind of *final* Romantic. In the end, they probably do deserve to inherit the earth, being the first literary movement to have conceived the masterstroke of eliminating the reader entirely.

At this point, I had better make it clear why I have spent such an apparently disproportionate and bad-tempered amount of time discussing this group, who, as I've said, are not even represented in this book. Like their US counterparts, the Postmoderns have now attained considerable academic influence in the UK, despite having no discernible readership beyond their own circle. In an attempt to widen that circle, they will happily omit almost every poet in this book from the surveys of the contemporary scene they present to their students; if our poets are mentioned, they tend to be dismissed on the grounds of their populism and stupidity. These must appear safe grounds: the Postmoderns sell few books to the general public, and undoubtedly think of themselves as the cleverer party. To propose—as I would for many of the writers in this book—that a 'poet' was merely a man or woman with a natural and exceptional talent for the composition of verses would have them foaming at the mouth; intelligence and systems should be enough for anyone. From which we might derive the following pretty chiasmus: the Mainstream insist on a talented minority, and a democracy of readership; the Postmoderns on an elite readership, and a democracy of talent.

If the Mainstream is to survive, it must find a way of reenlisting both the general reader *and* the Academy, whose articulate advocacy has always been its traditional means of protection when the culture and the times leave it exposed and unsupported. I hope this book offers some more evidence that the poets are still with us, waiting to be read, waiting to be reunited with that intelligent and creative reader from whom the times have conspired to divide them.

III

The criticism of anthologies generally consists, often in its entirety, of a list of unforgivable omissions; and, if the critic is feeling brave (or resigned to certain terminal enmities, or too young or old not to worry about meeting the poet in print, or very far away), the odd unforgivable inclusion. Given that, it's important, I think, to expand a little on the principles of selection Charles Simic has mention in his preface.

Firstly, despite the fact that this calls itself a British anthology, we have not included any Northern Irish poets. Despite the fact that the province remains largely under British rule, its poets—with only a few exceptions—tend to describe themselves as Irish, and not British; we felt that should be respected. The Republic has been as quick to claim them, too, and as a result they have benefited from that country's more outward-looking internationalism, and tend to enjoy a far stronger US profile than many of their counterparts on the larger island.

This book has two editors, and these are the poets we agreed on. Twelve more we disagreed on, sometimes deeply. We initially limited ourselves to twenty-five poets, found ourselves arguing for the inclusion of twenty more, and found space for eleven. We had to invoke a cut-off—otherwise this book would have been unpublishably long—and decided all poets we included had to be born after 1945, and have published at least two books by the end of 2002. Inevitably this meant some significant casualties at either end, and it might be that future editions of this book will correct this. As difficult a decision was to exclude poets who have produced their best work in either the other native tongues of these islands, or in its alternative Englishes. (One inclusion we did not agree on. I think it's good practise to exclude yourself from your own anthologies, and until now I've always followed that rule. My work is presented here against my better judgement, and at the insistence of my co-editor and my editors at Graywolf. But neither, possibly, would it have been fair to protect my own work from any criticism this introduction may invite.)

This anthology is an attempt to give some account of the work of most of the leading practitioners of the art in the UK today. It is not an attempt to represent, as other anthologies have been, the 'multiplicity of voices' to be heard in the UK. That anthology would have to be assembled by a committee, and would be the result of a duty, and not the partisan enthusiasm Charlie and I have for the subject. Besides, it has long been my own contention that 'voice'—that absurd passport we are obliged to carry through the insecurity of our age—is an extraliterary issue. The word 'voice' might usefully denote that characteristic tone whose identification can aid the reader in keeping the poems of a single poet in dialogue with one another; but more often its use is purely political. Personally, I don't believe the difference in a poet's cultural or sociosexual experience is necessarily the most significant or interesting thing about them, or even the third-most. So this is just a survey of poets; the word 'poet' being useful to the reader, ultimately, only insofar as it might identify a reliable source of good poems. Though I would hope that these days very little gets past the automatic self-scrutiny that is the most constructive product of the postfeminist and postcolonial era (though only a fool would try to negotiate their cultural blindspots—those that proceed from their being white—by *guessing* where they might lie, and then making some speculative accommodation), all an anthologist can ever do is include what they believe to be beautiful and true—or, if they can't love it, admirable in its technique and integrity of purpose.

Anyway, as you guys say, enough already. We hope this book will spawn deeper and more intimate relationships between some of these poets and you, the North American reader. We speak—don't be told otherwise—with almost exactly the same tongue, the beginning and the end of our special relationship, and where its truest commerce will take place. We offer this book in the spirit of its small and true furtherance.

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Kirriemuir
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