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BRITISH POETRY OF
THE SECOND WORLD
WAR

Linda M. Shires

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*For Helen E. Shires
and
in memory of Philip M. Shires*

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Preface

It is hard to believe that a decade of poetry could be summarily dismissed as a blackout period for art; yet this is still the generally-held attitude towards the 1940s. A myth about this poetic period flourishing in England and America runs as follows: during the war and post-war years, it was impossible to create poems with a keen intelligence, a clear head or a direct voice. John Press has noted the common opinion of the decade as a time in which all sound poetic values were 'debauched, when fecund images proliferated in surrealist luxuriance'.¹ Coherent poetic structures were abandoned or lost in a punch-drunk Apocalyptic fervour and wartime hysteria. The 1940s have been allocated a prime spot in the literary pigeon-hole labelled 'Hallucinatory/Third rate'. Perhaps no modern decade has been stereotyped so unfairly.

We view the 1940s through the distorted lenses of the 1950s poets and critics, many of whom were connected directly with the Movement. Their stereotype, consisting of misapprehensions that have been sustained by major critics up to this day, originally was an act of dissociation and self-assertion. According to their reduction, the only poets writing during the 1940s were Surrealists and Apocalyptics; these poets followed directly on the heels of Auden; and it was not until the Movement that genuine 'poetry' returned.

The Movement and others not associated with it directly distorted the previous decade when they chose the Apocalyptics (a group headed by Henry Treece and J. F. Hendry) and Dylan Thomas to typify the poetry of the period. The romantic Apocalyptics with their cannon and firework display of images and the inferior quality of even their best work stood out as a prime target. Yet no single group, and least of all this one, could be called representative of the 1940s. Furthermore, when they dismissed all poets of the 1940s along with Thomas as 'romantic scribblers',² they ignored the best poets of the war years who

deserve re-evaluation. Poets such as Henry Reed, Roy Fuller, G. S. Fraser, Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis hardly fit the label of wild irrationalists.

There has been a general reluctance to examine this decade seriously. Rather, the clichés about the 1940s have been maintained by critics decades later. In his influential essay 'Beyond the Gentility Principle',³ A. Alvarez reduces the poetry of the 1940s to a reaction against the 1930s. In his over-simplification, he sees the intelligent socio-political poetry of W. H. Auden simply replaced by the disjointed ramblings of Dylan Thomas. His opinions would have been more persuasive if he had dealt with and dismissed the variety of poetic voices or more forcefully illustrated their weaknesses in light of strengths. Instead, he downgrades the decade as a time when poets, for the most part, 'kiss meaning goodbye'.

Kenneth Allott too, in his *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (1950/62), falsely represents the 1940s. Allott's death in 1973 forbade any more revisions of text or introduction; yet the publishers let Allott's 1950 edition stand unchanged for twelve years until they reprinted the volume with revisions. In 1962 Allott frankly admitted his preference for Graves, Eliot, Auden, Yeats, Larkin and Davie. He declared that if he had had more space, he would have included additional poems of Davie, Larkin, Kinsella, Gunn, Tomlinson, Amis and Hughes. It is significant that in this list of would-be inclusions, there is no important figure from the forties. It seems odd that Keith Douglas, the best of the Second World War poets, finds no place here.

The fifties poets and critics and others prolonging the acceptance of a forties myth actually concentrated on the quantity of bad poetry written then. Or, even more narrowly, they chose the poetry of 1945–50 as representative; but there are two distinct periods in the decade, war and post-war, which should not be confused. This decade had the peculiar distinction of seeing a generation of poets split in half by cultural crisis instead of welded together by external events. Thus the Movement poets – Philip Larkin, John Wain, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings and others – who were born in the same years as the major war poets flowered not in the 1940s but in the early 1950s. In between the departure of W. H. Auden from England and the publicity campaign of the Movement in the early fifties, the schoolfellows of Larkin, Wain and Davie turned towards a war they could not escape. After the

war, social readjustment, paper shortages, and a general intellectual depression shifted attention to an older generation of poets. In the years from 1945–50, Kathleen Raine, Vernon Watkins, George Barker and others regained prominence. Their metaphysical and religious poetry is often erroneously linked with the Apocalyptics who flourished in the 1930s and early 1940s while the poets of World War Two remain ignored.

At a time when the poet's personal identity was severely threatened, when fables and myths were helpless against the reality of Nazi armies and gas chambers, there were poets who remained articulate and careful observers. Thirties poetry has been praised for its objectivity, but the early forties poetry can boast of an objectivity as well. G. S. Fraser, for instance, based in Cairo, writes of his English home and his adopted country with lucid concreteness. His personal landscapes are rooted in facts. The best poetry of the period did not succumb to ornamental falsity, but is characterized by intellectual honesty in the face of disaster and depression. Henry Reed wrote the epigraph for this generation of poets: 'Things may not be the same again; and we must fight/ Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping something alive.'

This study views the 1940s historically and concentrates on the younger generation. I do not chart the development or divergent paths of the Auden group: Day Lewis, Spender, MacNeice and Auden. I do not underestimate Auden's influence on British poetry after 1939, but it is not part of my subject. Nor do I emphasize the work of older poets such as Robert Graves or T. S. Eliot. Edith Sitwell, also of an older generation, does not find space here, nor do I treat the period of 1945–50 extensively. I mention it as background to a brief discussion of the Movement's success. My primary concern has been to reconstruct the early forties – its moods and themes – and to discover the various voices and idioms which made up the poetry scene at home and abroad. I have been interested in emphasizing the problem of order and disorder in the poet's world and in his creations during a time of crisis and in exploring the influence of war on post-war poetry.

I would like to add a word about terminology. There was a persistent habit among poets and critics during the 1940s and 1950s of using *romantic* and *Romantic* interchangeably. Most often they are referring to a special temper of mind in which emotion or imagination seems to triumph over formal considerations, not to

the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. Similarly, when they refer to *metaphysical*, they generally mean speculative or philosophically-oriented poetry, not specifically the Metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century. I have followed them in their use of this terminology.

NOTES

1. John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 230.
2. John Wain, 'Ambiguous Gifts', *Penguin New Writing* 40 (1950) p. 127.
3. A. Alvarez, 'Beyond the Gentility Principle', *Beyond All This Fiddle* (London: Allen Lane, 1968) pp. 35–6. Also see Geoffrey Grigson, *Poetry of the Present* (London: Phoenix House, 1949) p. 23, and A. Alvarez, 'Poetry of the Fifties: in England,' *International Literary Annual* #1, 1958 (New York: Criterion Books, 1959) p. 98.