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Paper margins: the 'outside' in poetry in the 1980s and 1990s

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Poetry emanating from what a few decades ago would have been deemed 'the margins' has become the major focus of publishing houses, journals and criticism, the latter evident in two recent collections of essays: *Poetry in the British Isles: Non-Metropolitan Perspectives* (Ludwig and Fietz 1995) and *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (Acheson and Huk 1996). I say 'were deemed' because, as Terry Eagleton has observed, the marginal has become 'somehow central' (1989/90: 4), an observation cited by the editors of *The New Poetry* (Hulse, Kennedy and Morley 1993: 18) and by Romana Huk in *Contemporary British Poetry* (Acheson and Huk 1996: 3). It is not the intention of this chapter, however, to survey the richness and diversity of poetry from what Eagleton sees as the new centre. Such a project would require a book in itself and then would probably fail for lack of space. Instead, I want to probe Eagleton's assumption in the light of some of the trends in poetry and poetry criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, while suggesting, however inadequately given the space available, the variety of work that became available in these decades.

It hardly needs pointing out that the poetry scene has changed since the publication of *British Poetry Since 1970*, in which Blake Morrison stereotyped the published poet as writing from a 'nostalgic liberal humanism' with 'strong respect for "traditional" forms, even strict metre and rhyme' (Jones and Schmidt 1980: 142). Morrison said as much two years later in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982: 11). But, as Robert Hampson and Peter Barry point out, if such a transformation had taken place by then, it was not reflected in the 'narrowness of poetic taste evidenced in the anthology's selection of poets and poems' (1993: 4). By the end of the decade, when it was

clearer how the nature of published poetry had changed, *The New British Poetry* (Allnutt *et al.*, 1988) drew attention to what Morrison and Motion had overlooked with, for example, substantial representation of black British, feminist and experimental poetry. Publishing houses outside London, for example Bloodaxe Books in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Carcanet in Manchester, Seren Books in South Wales and Blackstaff in Northern Ireland, have proved major players in bringing about this change, as have numerous poetry and literary magazines, various Arts Council initiatives, and locally organised poetry workshops and events. Even a cursory familiarity with published poetry in the last two decades – one has only to look at the two key anthologies of the 1990s from Newcastle-upon-Tyne: *The New Poetry* (Hulse, Kennedy and Morley 1993) and *New Blood* (Astley 1999) – would appear to confirm Eagleton's observation; in, for example, the strong presence of work by women as well as men from a range of different cultural communities including ethnic minorities and regional and working-class constituencies, through the proliferation of lesbian and gay writing, and the rich diversity of poetry emanating from Welsh, Scottish and Irish authors. But the poetry scene has been transformed in these decades not only in terms of the sensibilities, politics and form of emergent works but, as Romana Huk argues, 'the way in which the late twentieth century has become represented by critics, academics, and (as a consequence) publishers' (Acheson and Huk 1996: 3). Yet if recent criticism and current trends in publishing are to be credited with making the margins the new centre, that very criticism has itself been said to threaten 'to impoverish our understanding of poetry' (Day 1997: 1). But while Gary Day laments how the political has become the dominant idiom in poetry criticism, he never really defines whose 'understanding of poetry' he has in mind. A phrase like 'our understanding' is so shot through with value judgements and political implications that its insouciant employment, as here, must suggest that even in the 1990s the relationship between cultural politics and aesthetic issues is still a very pertinent subject.

We must be similarly cautious about Eagleton's argument that the marginal (which margins? from whose perspective?) has become centralised (according to what criteria?). The extent to which his observation is entirely reflective of the poetry scene is questionable even a decade later. Not all the 'marginal' or formerly marginal communities have freed themselves to the same extent from involvement with a centre-margin paradigm. Within the margins there are further margins. The latter point is well reflected in the selection of poets in the significant

anthology of the mid-1990s *The New Poetry*, even though its editors quote Eagleton triumphantly. While six poets from Scotland – Robert Crawford, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, W. N. Herbert, Jackie Kay, Frank Kuppner – are included, only two poets from Wales, despite the volume and diversity of contemporary, Welsh English-language poetry, have been selected: Tony Curtis and Duncan Bush. And there are even further layers of marginalisation within the margins suggested here; only two of the poets representing Scotland are women while no Welsh woman poet is included. Although Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's work in Irish is represented, with translations into English, it has obviously not been thought as politically sensitive to exclude work by a Welsh poet working in Welsh. Of course, any selection for an anthology cannot please everyone, and is bound to be open to criticism. But the relative representation of Welsh and Scottish writers, together with issues of gender and geographical balance within the selections, suggests that we are confronting issues about the different ways in which different margins may be regarded at different times and from different perspectives.

I wrote of 'familiarity with *published* poetry' above deliberately, wondering how many readers would balk at the word 'published'. The marginalisation of 'performance' poetry generally is an issue to which I will return later with reference, among others, to black British artists, for whom performance poetry has been an important (although only one) mode in the 1980s and 1990s. But the point might also be made here that of the sixty or so black British poets writing, recording or performing in Britain, only a handful, whether writing for the page or for the stage, are brought to the attention of students of literature or discussed in critical essays. Moreover, African and West Indian British poets generally enjoy a greater visibility than Asian British poets, despite notable exceptions such as Debjani Chatterjee.

Renewed focus on the periphery is usually linked in political terms to some sense of liberation, most obviously freedom from centralising forces and from the self-serving interests of the metropolis. But it is also a process of 'defamiliarisation'. As the poet and critic Jeremy Hooker points out, 'a bland centralism takes much for granted, as if the places where we or other people live are thoroughly known, and essentially much the same as the centre's image of itself' (Hooker 1982: 11). The impetus in the 1980s behind this approach to the 'margins' among academics across a range of disciplines was the rise in Europe and America of what came to be called 'new' or 'postmodern' geography, primarily concerned with re-theorising the relationship between history, geography

and social life (see, for example, Keith and Pike 1993; Norquay and Smyth 1997; Rose 1993; Soja 1989). But in poetry criticism it was also an example of how academics and scholars began to give a higher profile to the socio-geographical aspects of emergent writers, and how significant young poets began to develop, and represent, this feature of their writing. When Scottish poet Stewart Cohen writes of Ayrshire, Simon Armitage depicts aspects of the North of England, Ciaran Carson explores Belfast, or Christine Evans conceptualises North Wales, they are not writing only from a sense of discovering themselves at an empowering margin where the centralising forces of the centre may be resisted, although ultimately that may be the effect of some of their work. At its best, their work is rooted in a sophisticated awareness of the interrelated social life, geography and history of what Jeremy Hooker in the mid-1980s called a 'circumambient environment':

A place is a totality, a place is all that has created it through the process of time, it is the history, the geology, the circumambient environment, and in addition to that, it is the connection within a single compass of all those living forces. (Butler 1985: 203)

Thus, it is not that the metaphors and figures in, for example, Ciaran Carson's *The Irish For No* (1987), a key work from Northern Ireland in the late 1980s, are dense with social and cultural history but that the cartography of Belfast in which they are located is densely inscribed with sociocultural meanings. This particular circumambient environment is one that is constantly changing, not only through bombings and burnings but inscription and reinscription, through a past that is brought into a present which is constantly disintegrating. His tonal and syntactically complex writing documents and resists a system of signification which, as Neil Corcoran observes, is also a 'system of subjugation' (1992: 224). But since in postmodern Belfast the body itself is always liable to be commodified within this system of subjugation, the ultimate sites of resistance in *The Irish For No* are the discontinuities and intermittences of personal and cultural meaning in which the body is situated and represented.

Postmodern geography's emphasis upon the body as it is represented in the various spaces through which it moves has provided a new impetus for criticism to respond positively to poetry in which spatialised social and cultural differences are explored through the complexity of lived experience. The attention afforded the socio-spatial geography in Carson's work is an obvious example, but the way lesbian and gay poetry

defamiliarises conventional ways of regarding space, particularly traditional distinctions between 'private' and 'public', also comes readily to mind. Not surprisingly, it is an important motif in the work of the black Scottish poet Jackie Kay who was herself brought up by white parents. In *The Adoption Papers* (1991) – which tells the story of a black girl's adoption from three different perspectives, the mother, the birth mother and the daughter herself – and many of the poems in *Other Lovers* (1992) – which contrasts relationships in a variety of temporal, emotional and physical contexts – Kay writes incisively about relationships which in private and public have been complicated by issues of race, memory, family and inheritance. Conventional temporal and place logic is collapsed in order to locate the body within more subtle private and public registers. While the relationship between the personal and the social is not gainsaid, the sense of obligation and responsibility derives from personal rather than public or cultural paradigms. Thus, Kay's work raises a number of issues in relation to Eagleton's assumption that the margins have become centralised: the role that poetry has, can have, in this new public space; the nature of political meaning ascribed to particular poetics; the extent to which poetry can be confined within aesthetic, geographical or socio-cultural boundaries; and the relationship between poetic freedom and, in the broad sense, 'political' or 'public' responsibility. But for Kay and for others of her generation who use the personal to breach the boundaries of public space, these issues are all based on terms that are reconfigured within their work.

Recent re-theorising of power relationships is extremely sceptical of the paradigm into which Tony Harrison, for example, sometimes lapses, in which subordinate groups are perceived as being silenced altogether and unable to express alternative views stemming from their different structural positions in society. As Emily Martin has observed, modern forms of power 'do not just deny, prohibit, repress, and restrict', they 'produce', for example, discourses and knowledge (1992: 409). Such models of resistance have been employed explicitly or implicitly in drawing a range of writers from Scotland, Wales and ethnic communities into the spotlight. But the poets from these nations and communities that have attracted most academic attention in the 1990s have been those whose work, although recognisably 'Scottish', 'Welsh' and/or black, is not tied too closely to a constraining sense of place (Bell 1991; Craig 1996a; Wynn Thomas 1995a). This is not to say, however, that while they take a broad perspective that appears to break away from geographical boundaries, they are not concerned with culturally specific

and politically determined meanings. The most overlooked feature of the Scottish poet Robert Crawford's work is that he is not simply investigating Scottish history from a variety of perspectives but exploring how modern forms of power produce discourses and knowledge. As is clear from *The Scottish Assembly* (1990), one of the most significant volumes of poetry by a Scottish writer in the early 1990s, what is produced is often subversive, not necessarily in any directly antagonistic way, but through exposing the constructed nature of the dominant discourses. This point is well illustrated by 'Alba Einstein', which imagines a cultural industry developing around confirmation of Einstein's Scottish origins:

Scots publishers hurled awa
MacDiarmid like an overbaked potato, and swooped
On the memorabilia: *Einstein Used My Fruitshop*,
Einstein in Old Postcards, *Einstein's Bearsden Relatives*.
Hot on their heels came the A. E. Fun Park,
Quantum Court, Glen Einstein Highland Malt.

(1990: 53)

A lot of the poetry discussed in academic journals and poetry magazines such as *Bête Noire* and *Verse* may be linked to a point stressed by Michel Foucault, that 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1982: 209). For me this is the point from which Carol Ann Duffy's well-known 'Standing Female Nude' (1985: 46), a key poem of the 1980s, starts out. On a cursory reading, the poem would appear to be an explication of how power silences subordinate groups. The artist's model, the speaker of the monologue, is literally told by the artist, 'Don't talk'; and his work objectifies her as a commodity to be bought, sold and possessed, as the socio-economic system does herself. However, her resistance is not only in the conclusion of the poem when the portrait is completed – 'I say/Twelve francs and get my shawl./It does not look like me.' – but in the discourses which her relation to the dominant power structures produce. In this sense, her portrait is never completed. The artistic representation, analogous to the bourgeoisie and the larger socio-economic system, does not silence her, but produces ironic, mocking counter discourses: 'The bourgeoisie will coo/at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art'. Here the relationship between the male, clothed artist and the female, naked model is the product of two discourses which ostensibly interleave to sustain male power, but is potentially undermined by the counter discourses which the latter produces. These counter discourses are the product, as here, of resistance or of what is excluded when boundaries are drawn by those in power, a recurring

theme in *Mean Time* (1993) and *The World's Wife* (1999). They are a way of resisting not only authority structures but how language constructs the individual's subjectivity.

Of course, issues of language and agency are inevitable themes in poetry emanating from what are, or were once, the margins. Here there would seem to be a basis for discussing the margins homogeneously. But we must be careful to remember that the structure of power in one periphery is not necessarily the same as in another. This is a point frequently made in the work of Mike Jenkins, a South Wales poet whose work is particularly appropriate to an essay on poetry and the margins. Although associated with Wales (which has itself been too often approached in terms of a centre-periphery paradigm), Jenkins has lived most of his adult life in a marginalised area within Wales: Merthyr, the oldest industrial town in Britain but now a by-word for post-industrial decline and social poverty. It is no coincidence that Jenkins's concern with the interconnections of language and power has become more pronounced as he has become more interested in giving voice to adolescents from the deprived Gurnos housing estate who attend the school in which he teaches. The use of non-standard English in poetry associated with the margins is often approached within rather limited parameters, relying on arguments that standard English 'cannot render the experiences of those on the margin, as if one idiom is expressive while another is not' (Day 1997: 4). Poets as diverse as the British Guyanese writer David Dabydeen, the black British performance poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Scottish writer Tom Leonard and the Welsh author Mike Jenkins use dialect for many complex reasons, one of which is to explore the production of counter discourses. 'Gurnos Boy' (from *A Dissident Voice* (1990), reprinted, with revisions, in *Graffiti Narratives*, 1994) is one of Jenkins's most successful poems about the estate. Like Duffy's artist's model, the boy handles many of the discourses that try to determine his individual subjectivity with a bitter, street-wise irony:

This place is gettin famous f' murderers,
we produce em like Oovers washin-machines.
If this Government push me much further
I'll afta cut the posh people clean
in their big ouses with burglar larms.

(1994: 17-18)

The language in which black British writers work usually originates with their sense of themselves, of their history and of the diaspora to which they belong. This is certainly the case in two major works first

published in the 1980s. David Dabydeen, who is able to work effectively across poetry, fiction and literary criticism with a similar aplomb, employs Creole dialect, in *Slave Song* (1984) and *Creole Odyssey* (1988), because it provides access to a particular culture, particular experiences and specific histories:

Black men cover wid estate ash
 E ead haad an dry like calabash,
 Dut in e nose-hole, in e ear-hole,
 Dut in e soul, in e battie-hole.

All
 day
 sun
 bun
 tongue
 bun

all
 day
 throat
 cut
 haat
 hut

wuk na dun, na dun, na dun!
 Hack! Hack! Hack! Hack!
 Cutlass slip an cut me cack!

(1988: 31)

At one level, Dabydeen encapsulates the monotony and the brutality of slavery, here specifically cutting cane. But he also demonstrates a different social and textual affiliation for black people, in his case Guyanese, from that assumed by white British people who have a different history in terms of empire and slavery. The indentured worker of the cane plantations is not a voice that has often been as fully articulated as here. It does not directly challenge the dominant white discourses but indirectly exposes the fictitious nature of the constructs, of the social and textual narratives, that have given the British centre cohesion against the various margins on which it has been constructed. It calls into question the conventional disposition of space and time, suggesting the possibility of complex reconfigurations of difference and identity, exclusion and inclusion, centre and margin, outsider and insider.

No reconceptualising of the periphery has been as complex and far-reaching in its implications as the emergent emphasis in the 1990s upon 'internal difference' in Homi K. Bhabha's notion of 'dissemiNation', by which he means the way in which nations are 'internally marked by cultural difference, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense cultural differences' (1990a: 299). Internal, sometimes antagonistic, differences within the periphery itself have often proved a more important and potent source of creativity for poetry than relationships with the centre, as is evident in the Scottish poet W. N. Herbert's *Forked Tongue* (1994) and *The Looters* (1989) by Robert Minhinick, another poet associated with post-industrial South Wales, but this time Glamorgan's Heritage Coast on which he lives. In an essay on his own work, Minhinick has observed:

Wales is a country of strong creative frictions, at least I feel they should be creative, especially for writers. The rural and the industrial, traditional industry and new technology, the English and the Welsh languages, a past representing an emphatic and unique cultural identity and a present in which that identity might become irreversibly eroded. (In Butler 1985: 187)

The implication of the concept of internal difference is not necessarily to fragment the periphery so that it ceases to have any significant role in the production of meaning but to redefine it in ways that are closer to the lived experience of those within it. This distinction has been articulated succinctly by Mike Jenkins in an introduction to a selection of his own work:

In the past, I've been called a local (Merthyr) poet, an urban poet and a political poet and I hope this selection will both prove and confound those terms. Living on the edge of a moor still owned by the Coal Board, teaching at a school overlooking the Brecon Beacons yet drawing pupils from council estates and older communities and, above all, seeing politics in terms of people's lives: all these contribute to a tension which questions categories. (Stephens 1991: 155)

But Jenkins also suggests here, in his allusion to the demise of the coal industry, that the material operations and cultural consequences of globalisation mean that we cannot think of the margins in purely cultural terms. We have to engage with economic and sociological factors. As I have argued elsewhere (1997), both Jenkins and Minhinick can be seen as responding to the transition in the 1970s and 1980s from modernity to postmodernity. By postmodernity, I mean the quite evident shift at this

time from an industrial to a post-industrial society with its own organising principles, in which new forms of technology and information are central. The poems dealing with a post-industrial society in Jenkins's *Invisible Times* (1983) and *A Dissident Voice* (1990), and in Minhinnick's volumes published about the same time, *The Dinosaur Park* (1985) and *The Looters* (1989), offer a variant on the way in which the regions were associated in the 1970s with an escape from centralisation and universalism. By the mid 1980s, the forces of centralisation were global rather than metropolitan, international rather than national.

While Minhinnick and Jenkins are very different poets, the understanding of 'postmodernity' which emerges in their respective poetry is not fundamentally different: the rise of an image/media-saturated society, the increasing importance of consumption and of a social geography based on consumer markets, and the erosion of traditional, collective and personal identities. But what Jenkins and Minhinnick discover happening in post-industrial Wales is a phenomena experienced throughout the Atlantic archipelago. There are fundamental parallels between, for example, the image-saturated, multi-media packages based on what were once real working mines by the Welsh heritage industry in Mike Jenkins's poem, 'Industrial Museum' and the simulacra that develop around Einstein in Robert Crawford's 'Alba Einstein' to which I referred on p. 106. But while there are similarities in the post-industrial world emerging in Minhinnick's Wales or Crawford's Scotland, it is experienced differently in different regions. Jenkins' and Minhinnick's critique of 'postmodernity', and their means of arguing for resistance, is based on the importance of interaction with the natural environment, an especially strong motif in Minhinnick's work, and on an identifiable fusion of people and place at the level of microgeography, characteristic preoccupations of Welsh, English-language poetry.

If it is appropriate to think of the poets of working-class origin and sympathy who came to prominence in the 1980s as 'postmargin', the concept might be equally applicable to women poets who achieved prominence at that time, many of whom – such as Liz Lochhead, Gillian Clarke, Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay – are not only from cultures which had been marginalised by the centre but cultures in which women had been marginalised. Both the Scottish poet Lochhead and the Welsh, English-language poet Clarke have emerged from social and economic circumstances which, as Cairns Craig says of Lochhead, had entrapped their foremothers (1996a: 355). In Clarke's case this is evident in her early poem, 'Marged':

I think of her sometimes when I lie in bed,
 falling asleep in the room I have made in the roof-space
 over the old dark parlwr where she died
 alone in winter, ill and penniless.
 Lighting the lamps, November afternoons,
 a reading book, whisky gold in my glass.

(1985: 105)

But while insisting on difference, the poem seems to want to seek out an 'essence' to turn into essentialising notions. It concludes: 'What else do we share, but being women?' This is a recurring danger in Clarke's poetry, even in her major long poem of the 1990s, *The King of Britain's Daughter* (1993), but one that for the most part she avoids. However, it is also a danger of which we must be aware as critics. Lochhead's experiences are different from Clarke's, rooted in different personal, geographical and sociocultural circumstances, as are Robert Crawford's or Robert Minninnick's experiences of postmodernity. There is nothing in Gillian Clarke's poetry comparable to Lochhead's view of the mother, in Cairn Craig's words, 'hemmed in by fearful daughter fantasies' (1996a: 352):

Everybody's mother
 was the original Frigid-
 aire Icequeen clunking out
 the hardstuff in nuggets, mirror-
 silvers and ice-splinters that'd stick
 in your heart.

(Lochhead 1984: 94)

The importance of resisting received notions of nationality, as well as unified concepts of gender, have become increasingly recognised in poetry criticism. But one of the problems is that the geographical groupings that have been used to indicate the heterogeneity of race and region in women's writing have tended to enforce a homogeneity of particular races and regions. In the recent study of poetry in the Atlantic archipelago from non-metropolitan perspectives which I cited at the beginning of this essay, Christopher Harvie warns that 'one cannot see the periphery whole, or even the individual nationalities whole: one can try to see a constant dialogue of communities with their individual members and with one another' (1995: 6). The need to recognise complex lived experience is important in the case of black writers who, as C. L. Innes says, tend to be associated with group identities and enterprises (1996: 315). But this does not mean taking writers out of place, and out of group identities and enterprises. It means being true to how poetry recomposes

itself in dialogue with place or group identity, with the way in which places map ourselves, and with the occluded histories of power relationships.

Most of the poems in the black British section of *The New British Poetry* (Allnutt *et al.* 1988), like much of the work selected for the anthology, provide examples of how concepts and experiences may be redefined when taken outside the centre-periphery paradigm, as is evident in Fred D'Aguiar's 'Half-caste' which he included from his own work:

explain yuself
wha yu mean
when yu say half-caste
yu mean when light an shadow
mix in de sky
is a half-caste weather /
well in dat case
england weather
nearly always half-caste
in fact some o dem cloud
half-caste

(Allnutt *et al.* 1988: 6)

Here the mocking and ironic voice of the poet/narrator is located not simply in difference but a mental space that has its own configurations. The posing of the question, 'wha yu mean', arrests the fictitious formulation on which absolute notions of identity, race and the centre are based. But like Dabydeen's employment of Creole, D'Aguiar's use of dialect emphasises how identity is always both personal and social, linked in the dominant symbolic order. Different concepts of identity are brought together and clash with each other, a recurring feature also of *British Subjects* (1993), which should compete with Dabydeen's *Turner* (1994) as the most significant work by a black poet in the 1990s, where he mockingly observes on re-entering the country,

my passport photo's too open-faced,
haircut wrong (an afro) for the decade;
the stamp, British Citizen not bold enough
for my liking and too much for theirs.

(*'Home'*, 1993: 14)

It is difficult to compare, say, the experience of Wales by Welsh poets writing in English with those of black British poets, although sometimes postcolonial criticism invites us to do so. However, what is clear is that many poets of Welsh or black British origin writing in the 1980s and

1990s locate themselves in a place that they do not see only in terms of a centre-margin paradigm. They tend to see themselves increasingly in a place that is different. This is especially true of those black British poets to whom I referred at the beginning of this chapter, who, from the point of view of the centre, have not received the recognition of David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar or John Agard. These writers, such as Kwesi Owusu, Amon Saba Saakana or Lemn Sissay, locate themselves in a space which owes more to the African diaspora, to black history, African roots and orature, embracing poetry as performance, and to music more than a British-African paradigm.

Performance poetry, poetry readings, a plethora of small press publications and little magazines still constitute from even the 'new' centre's point of view a marginal cultural activity. Many of these literary magazines, as David Kennedy says of *Bête Noire*, demonstrate 'how the blandishments of the centre should be resisted' (1991/92: 29). *Bête Noire* and *Verse* are placed at the front line of resistance because Hull and Scotland are good 'locations from which to focus on multi-cultural and international concerns', but *The North*, published by The Poetry Business in Huddersfield, has proved itself similarly well situated, as has *The Wide Skirt*, edited by Geoff Hattersley, one of the most significant North of England poets of the 1990s, in South Yorkshire. At a grass roots level, the same might be said of much performance poetry. But, as Simon Armitage's review of a poetry performance by Adrian Mitchell in the same issue as Kennedy's 'magazine roundup' exemplifies, discussion of it usually gets bogged down in definitions and a 'readerly' and 'performance' binarism. However, so-called performance poets, such as Attila the Stockbroker, challenge not only what we might think of as poetry but also conventional definitions of the margins. *Scornflakes* (1992) includes satiric responses to subjects of popular concern, such as the High Court Judge who told a hitchhiker who was raped late at night that she was guilty of contributory negligence. Like the black British poets Lemn Sissay, Benjamin Zephaniah and Linton Kwesi Johnson, whose collections *Rebel Without Applause*, *Propa Propaganda* and *Tings on Times* were also published by Bloodaxe, he employs simplistic rhymes and discomfiting social aggression. But, like theirs, his work is also direct, spontaneous, witty and humorous. It employs arresting imagery, original social juxtapositions, and a defamiliarising use of language. It challenges what is meant by 'poetry', especially when we remember that many so-called 'readerly' poets include in their volumes a range of work from across the readerly-performance continuum. In fact, Liz Lochhead,

as Robert Crawford has pointed out (Crawford and Varty 1993), relies heavily on puns that work better in speech than writing, and draws upon radio and music hall, especially its tradition of comic monologue. The distinction between readerly and performance work is further complicated by the pressure exerted on poets by their agents and publishers to give more readings and public appearances and by the presence of writers such as Jo Shapcott (1992, 1999) who have created poems for the stage that work as well on the page.

In fact, the startling unpredictability that characterises the work of many contemporary poets can be linked to a fusion of the readerly and the oral. In becoming the new centre, the margins have brought with them a renewed interest in 'other tongues', which extends to the mother tongue, to formerly silenced gender and sexual discourses, to the communication of a wide range of non-metropolitan experiences, but also to oral cultures and traditions marginalised by the emphasis upon the printed word. Whether it be the Scottish ballad, the Irish story-telling tradition, the comic monologue of the music hall, the oral culture of the school playground or of the new housing estate, the oral often contains the seeds of subversion. Material presented orally is always more susceptible of interruption and disruption than material presented in writing. One wonders whether Liz Lochhead is so much more a radical poet than Gillian Clarke partly because she draws so much on oral modes while Clarke's work is rooted in written forms often associated with women, such as the diary and the letter.

In aesthetic terms, the centre-margin debate is based upon the centrality of familiar assumptions about poetry which professional critics often reiterate unquestioningly. Despite Gary Day's generally incisive appraisal of what he perceives as the dominant political idiom in poetry criticism in the mid 1990s, he lapses into unchallenged assumptions such as 'poetry is private, almost intimate', or 'poetry aims to soften the language to receive the impress of the personal' (1997: 7, 8). Despite his rejection of the political idiom, Day argues for poetry in terms of resistance, to 'endlessly proliferating jingles, slogans and sound bites of consumer culture', to 'the rigidities of headline culture' and to 'public rhetoric' (8). Unfortunately, Day's singular model of what constitutes poetry does not recognise that in the work of many leading poets, whether of readerly or performance persuasion, Robert Crawford, Mike Jenkins, Liz Lochhead, Attila the Stockbroker and Fred D'Aguiar, there is a dialectic with the characteristic forms of communication in consumer society.

The use of modes of speech and writing in the 1980s and 1990s not normally associated with mainstream poetry two or three decades ago, however, is a linguistic as well as a political phenomenon, although ultimately the two cannot be easily separated. Drawing on the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of 'heteroglossia', Robert Crawford points out that 'if language is normally made up of languages, if discourse is always a blend of discourses', then the linguistic hybridity we associate with Anglo-Welsh, Scottish and black British poets 'becomes typical rather than eccentric' (1993: 7). This is to say that the multilayered linguistic and ideological nature of formerly marginalised groups is itself being recognised as typical.

One of the salient features of poetry in the 1990s is the cross-currents of influence, evident in poetry from the North of England in Geoff Hattersley's *Don't Worry* (1994), drawing on a diverse range of American poetic influences, and, to a lesser extent, in Graham Mort's *Snow from the North* (1992), both of which interweave northern environments with international perspectives and viewpoints. In this respect, it is perhaps the second generation of post 1970 Northern Ireland poets, more than any other, that has established an important presence in the poetry of the Atlantic archipelago; their work often amounts to a complex amalgam of differences and border crossings. As Neil Corcoran has observed of Paul Muldoon, 'collations, collisions and collusions' in their work create an 'extraordinarily open and free poetic space' (1993: 211). The truth of this is evident in Paul Muldoon's long poem *Madoc* (1990), which along with Medbh McGuckian's *Marconi's Cottage* (1991), marked the transition in particular Northern Ireland poetry circles to the kind of work Corcoran has in mind. But what Corcoran does not go on to consider is that the confluence of intellectual currents produces a conjunction between dominant and marginal modes of discourse. Clair Wills, however, argues that the fragmented and self-reflexive nature of Tom Paulin's, Paul Muldoon's and Medbh McGuckian's work can serve to marginalise poetry since its meanings are so often inaccessible, except to readers educated in different poetic traditions, able to respond to the juxtaposition of different styles and not put off by enigmatic statements and semantic indeterminacy (1993: 13ff). There are a number of possible explanations for the prevalence of this type of writing among late twentieth-century poets, many of the features of which can be clearly associated with postmodernism. One is that the way in which the marginal has become central is itself a reflection of a much wider cultural sea change in which monologism, centricity and the notion of the

speaking subject have been rendered untenable. Laudable as this development may be, postmodernism can now be seen as the new universalism, capable of incorporating postmodernist writing from different parts of the globe in an all encompassing internationalism. While the work of poets from different cultures and traditions may appear to share postmodernist characteristics, it is important to distinguish between them, to recognise that different writers may employ similar strategies for different purposes and derive their knowledge of them from different sources, and to develop ways of discussing 'postmodernist' writing that recognise cultural nuances. The focus for poetry's continuing interest in the political, in identity and resistance in the new millennium, is the future of poetry in a globalised, electronic culture, which will itself create, of course, new centres and margins.