

Editor's note

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Editor's Note

The papers in this volume have been selected from those offered at the 1983 Geneva symposium on "Poetry and Poetics." Taken together, they constitute, despite a variety of approaches appropriate to that of the contributors to an international gathering, a remarkably sustained and interconnected investigation of the kinds of contexts in which poetry may, or should be, or has been read, by whom, and for what purposes. The essays fairly reflect the kinds of interrogation characteristic of present critical discourse – from the identification of an illuminating context (artistic, intellectual, psychological) for an individual poet's work, through general considerations of the aesthetic theory and practice of a period, to analyses and evaluation of the concepts and practice of criticism itself.

The first four essays deal with British poets, the last four with American ones. The two pivotal essays address, in very different ways, the question of Modernism, which links them to the preceding and following treatments of Hopkins and Williams. The fortuitous symmetry of this arrangement suggests the balanced motion between individual instance and explanatory theory shared by almost all the essays, thus creating among them the coherence that Wittgenstein described as a "family resemblance." While any one member may be wholly unlike any one other, each shares something – here, subject, issue, or method – with some other member, forming a continuum of mutual resemblance. Hence, the problem of the precursor, detected in the way that Milton's versification both recalls and represses that of Spenser, reappears in Berryman's psychological discovery and recreation of Anne Bradstreet. Two-thirds of the essays take matters of form as points of departure: aural and prosodic, as Milton's echoes, Hopkins' "voicings," Herbert's representation of divine speech, Auden's use of the sonnet; or visual, as Williams' use of color, or the general post-typographic phenomenon of iconicity. Another, partly overlapping, group of six essays seeks to define or trace the consequences of some aspect of Modernism – up to

and including contemporary post-structuralism. Of these, four find such consequences negative in varying degrees: two for the reading of individual poets, where the New Criticism is seen as inadequate to Whitman and the "linguistic moment" to Hopkins; and two more generally, where the poetics of "strangeness" and the assimilation of Williams into the academy are seen as unwarrantably ahistorical.

In this latter connection is found the final balance of the collection, a poised tension between the claims of formal analysis and historical contextualization. Whether mediated from various points on the current critical horizon (Bloom's notion of influence, Said's analysis of "career," the linguistics of Jakobson, the sociology of Habermas) or from more traditional perspectives, the essays engage this central dialectic of present debate. In so doing they suggest what may be its most enduring legacy: that criticism has become conscious of itself and of the need to interrogate and clarify its procedures – even to the point, reached by the last essay in the volume, of examining its own assumptions as a "profession."

R. Waswo