ANTHOLOGY OF 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY (Part III)

READ BY:
Kingsley Amis
Thomas Blackburn
Charles Causley
Donald Davie
D. J. Enright
Thom Gunn
John Heath-Stubbs
Ted Hughes
Elizabeth Jennings
Philip Larkin
Edward Lucie-Smith
George MacBeth
Peter Porter
Vernon Scannell
John Wain

A JUPITER RECORDING Issued by Folkways

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Folksways Records FL 9879

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THE NEW POETRY SCENE

Too seldom, when we hear a poem read aloud, can we take it in simultaneously with the eye. This record, and others in the Folkways/Scholastic poetry series, lets us do just that. Here we can read and hear a poem in all its fullness. Here are both the written words and the voice of the poet.

Poetry today is adding the sound of the poem-aloud to the poem-in-print. Poets today are being widely read; they are being listened to by unprecedented audiences. Poetry readings are an established part of mid-century culture. Ten years ago I could start out for a campus poetry reading, inadvertently arrive ten minutes late, yet almost surely find a seat up front. Today I must arrive early or stand, if I am allowed inside at all.

Campus poets, poets on the circuits, poets anxious or willing to be heard are reading in classrooms, night clubs, coffee shops, lecture halls, and at rallies. College students today are likely to hear as many poems as they read. High school students in favored localities are listening to, and engaging in dialogue with, today's best poets. Doors of New York City schools have opened wide to poets. As I write, in the spring of 1967, the Academy of American Poets and Detroit Adventure are bringing Denise Levertov, Louis Simpson, Robert Creeley, Donald Hall, and other notable poets into Detroit for a course titled "Dialogs on the Art of Poetry." In Houston, at the Thanksgiving, 1966, meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, thirteen featured poets attracted crowds to hotel auditoriums for the Festival of Modern Poetry.

Few published poets are immune to the epidemic of requests to read before public and academic audiences. Fewer want immunization. (Even the poet who says he is his own audience is curious about larger audiences.)

The printing press encouraged a poetry written more for the eye than the ear. Today's technology, including radio, television, public address systems, and recordings, encourages a poetry for eyes and ears. A poet communicating in that most personal of all media, his own voice, cares about how his poem will sound to a listener. The voices he puts into his poems are shaped and colored by his anticipation of a listening audience. Burgeoning audiences animate the poet's interest in departing from older forms, from print-tied notions of what rhyme and rhythm are.

Although forums for poetry proliferate, separation of print from sound is still characteristic. It is listening and looking that the Folkways/Scholastic poetry series intends to provide. Although the poet may not be the most "dramatic" reader of his poems, it is his own reading that provides the best base for talk about what he "intended." The poem in its independent life may be different from what the poet thinks it is. But the poet's cadences, tones, and emphases invite the listener to test his own reading against the poet's.

Reader-listeners will develop a sense of where poetry is and where it is going. They will get something of the range of rhythms and metaphors that makes today's poetry different from yesterday's. Today's images come more often from the kitchen, the ball field, from the newspaper, hospital, or alley than from the natural universe sung by earlier poets. The polluted river is more likely to be protested than the springtime brook is to be idealized. Today's poet has been to the big city, and his diction shows it. Today's rhythms, like today's world, are complex. Silences in poems are being "heard" more frequently.

Most important, exerting the double energy of eye and ear promotes discovery of the best language there is. Beyond image and rhythm, beyond metaphor and diction, lies meaning. Today's poet, like yesterday's, has a clear vision of what is important about being alive.

          — Stephen Dunning
THE JUPITER ANTHOLOGY
OF 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY
PART III

KINGSLEY AMIS, THOMAS BLACKBURN, CHARLES CAUSLEY, DONALD DAVIE, D.J. ENRIGHT, THOM GUNN, JOHN HEATH-STUBBS, TED HUGHES, ELIZABETH JENNINGS, PHILIP LARKIN, EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH, GEORGE MacBETH, PETER PORTER, VERNON SCANNELL, JOHN WAIN, Reading Their Own Poetry.

The poems I have chosen for this third part of the Jupiter Anthology are intended to show the scope and variety of English poetry since about 1950; most of the poems, indeed, were written much more recently than that. All the poets represented have made their serious reputations since the second world war; but one should remember that some of the best work by such older poets as Edwin Muir, Robert Graves, Louis MacNeice, George Barker, and Roy Fuller—all represented in earlier parts of the Jupiter Anthology—has been written during this period.

I hope that, on the evidence of the twenty-seven poems on this recording, listeners will find it difficult to characterise the poetry of the past dozen years or so. It is easy, given a small sample of deliberately angled work, to make generalisations about 'the characteristic tone of the 1950s', or to observe that poets today are concerned with personal themes; but there really is a shared tone in Causley's 'Child's Song' and Amis's 'A Song of Experience', and would one, in any usual sense, call Dave's 'To a Brother in the Mystery', Hughes's 'Hawk Roosting' and MacBeth's 'The Absences' 'personal'?

On the other hand, one can see that certain broad types of poem are in favour; for example, what one might call the anecdote-with-a-moral, represented here by Amis, Larkin, Scannell, Lucie-Smith's 'The Lesson' and, in a rather different way, Heath-Stubb's 'Bryant Park, New York'. And the language of many of these poems is direct, with a liking for colloquial effects.

All the poems are read by the poets themselves, and here too there is variety. With more and more recordings, broadcast readings, poetry recitals in clubs, schools and theatres, festivals of poetry, the poet is becoming more sure of himself as a performer of his own work, after a longish period during which poetry was either a silent art or was taken over in performance by the actor. As performers, perhaps not all these poets are of equal value; but there is always, surely, a documentary interest in the way a poet reads his own work, and the idiosyncrasies of a poet's voice and manner often underlie or make clearer points which an actor's reading, however intelligent, might smooth over and hide.

This is not meant to be a comprehensive selection of the best recent verse. Some worthwhile poets have been omitted through lack of space, and inevitably there is a certain amount of personal bias. I cannot expect everyone to agree with my choice; but I hope that everyone will find a good proportion of work worth listening to, and more than once. Good poetry is something to be lived with and rehearsed in the mind and with the voice, not skimmed through or allowed to go in one ear and out the other.

Anthony Thwaite

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Side One

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VERNOR SCANNELL (1922- ): The Telephone Number.

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Side Two

VERNOR SCANNELL: Dead Dog.
JOHN WAIN (1925- ): Time Was.
ELIZABETH JENNINGS (1926- ): For a Child Born Dead; The Shot.
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