



'Introduction' In: Crisis and Contemporary Poetry

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Author(s)	Karhio, Anne;Crosson, Seán;Armstrong, Charles I.
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Introduction

Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson and Charles I. Armstrong

Occasionally, major collective turning points find means of poetic expression that are not only apposite or equivalent to their own heft, but actually end up transcending the given circumstances, becoming exemplary utterances capable of capturing the underlying emotion of other events of a similar cast. W.H. Auden's 'September 1, 1939' is a classic example of this kind of crisis poem, as it not only reacts with alacrity to the news of the German invasion of Poland, but also has become an iconic reference point drawn upon in the aftermath of 9/11 and the recent financial crisis. It expresses a generalized sense of vulnerability: 'Defenceless under the night / Our world in stupor lies'. It shows how that sense is something shared in a globalized world: 'Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth'. Furthermore, it also highlights the fact that the poetic response must try to find its own place and measure amid a Babelian chaos of voices and rumours: the poet must seek to establish 'a voice / To unfold the folded lie' (Auden, 1977, pp. 246–7).

Although 'September 1, 1939' responds incisively to a particular moment, its underlying sense of alarm and quandary did not come completely out of the blue. A few months earlier, in April 1939, Auden had written a poem simply titled 'Crisis' (later renamed 'They') that was less convincing in its attempt to capture the essence of the moment. Nevertheless, the later poem has a compelling sense of particularity about it – a specificity of both time and space: not only do the opening lines situate the speaker in 'one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street', but the poem also returns later to the New York setting. What might have seemed a distant and abstract political crisis is actually inscribed in the very place where we meet the poet: 'Where blind skyscrapers use / Their full height to proclaim / The strength of collective Man'. Seeking

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to find an individual – yet not isolated or narcissistic – response to the collective disaster of the moment, Auden's poem also pays witness to a crossroads of identity. Having recently left England behind, the poet must negotiate humanist responsibility with personal desire, balancing 'universal love' with the importunate desire 'to be loved alone'. For Auden, the personal crisis cannot be completely isolated from a sense of challenge to his very vocation. If 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' had proclaimed that 'poetry makes nothing happen', it had of course also granted that the poet could – through indirect means – 'Teach the free man how to praise'. In 'September 1, 1939', the power of poetry is channelled towards a tacit or possible reply to an anguished question: 'Who can release them now, / Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?' (ibid., 245–7).

Crises of politics, place, person and poetry will be addressed in this volume, which seeks to articulate fresh vantage points on how the poetry of the present responds to situations of turmoil and tension. How far back, beyond the precedent of someone like Auden, can we trace the issues that poetry is tackling today? From what underlying disaster or intrinsic fault does poetry's need to reach the deaf and speak for the dumb stem? There may not be easy answers to such questions; it is often in the nature of a crisis that a large part of its challenge will lie in the calibration and fine-tuning of questions, rather than in the arrival at pat formulations or solutions. Poetry's efficacy may be that it helps us approach or frame a problem, rather than providing the sort of technological or political solutions one seeks for elsewhere. It is possible to see crisis as endemic to modernity in general, as the desire to rationalize and control humanity tends to provoke recurring, large-scale disaster – as indicated in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002). According to Adorno, lyric poetry's formalism is an indirect response that 'implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive' (Adorno, 1991, p. 38). Ironically, the more radical forms of such formalism tend to alienate poetry from its potential audience, exacerbating or creating an inverse mirror image of the very crisis to which they respond. But if such an argument seems too abstract and isolated from concrete historical facts, more specific narratives are forthcoming. David Harvey has interpreted the aesthetic modes of modernism and postmodernism as responses to a changing experience of time and space in bourgeois Western society, resulting in a 'crisis of representation' (Harvey, 1990, p. 260).¹ For Harvey, the origins of these responses in Britain are to be found in the depression of the late 1840s, which 'shook the confidence

of the bourgeoisie and challenged its sense of history and geography in profound ways' (ibid.) In Ireland, the same period saw a crisis of a very different kind, though one of no less profound an impact on the cultural and artistic life of the nation up until today. Apart from the tragedy of the millions who died of hunger, the famine also resulted in large-scale migration and a loss of language, both of which effects continue to play a crucial part in a perceived crisis of identity.² If neither place nor language can provide a fixed point from which to examine one's relation to the world, what does it mean to call oneself Irish, or, for that matter, British, Scottish or African-American? What, if anything, should poetry's function be in this situation? Simultaneously, however, wider issues concerning modernism and postmodernism as responses to social and historical developments, and the question of what is to follow them, continue to concern critics and poets alike.

If Harvey considers the crisis of the mid-nineteenth century to lie at the root of the emergence of first modernist and then postmodernist responses to the changing experience of space and time, the germs of poetry's relationship to crisis reach further back. Romanticism, notes Kate Rigby, 'has long been one of those points of eternal return for literary criticism, a touchstone on which successive generations of critics have tried out favored theories and approaches' (Rigby, 2004, p. 1). Certainly the experience of time-space compression can be linked to the industrial revolution, which also generated an aesthetic response in the form of the emergence of Romantic poetry. The revolution and its aftermath in France, as well as the responses to it on the northern side of the English Channel impacted in crucial ways on the society, and the literature, of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Britain. Recent debates on poetry's societal function and its (possible) autonomy as an aesthetic practice in many ways echo the situation of this earlier period. In Northern Ireland, questions of poetic responsibility or political disengagement have in recent decades been the object of intense critical disputes. The tension between an approach focusing on societal formations and more aesthetic or formalist understandings of poetry echoes the situation in America; the civil rights movements on both sides of the Atlantic have in many ways changed the ways in which poetry is read today. However, P.M.S. Dawson's outline of the situation in Britain two hundred years ago shows that the battlefield is in no way unprecedented:

As upper- and middle-class intellectuals all the Romantic poets found themselves carried along on the movements of social change with

whose consequences they were in various ways forced to quarrel. These movements were in the last analysis economic, comprising what have become known as the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, with their accompanying changes in attitude. (Dawson, 1993, p. 66)

For Dawson, the idealism of poets such as Shelley was based on values and ideas that ended up promoting those forces of capitalist economy to which the poets themselves would hardly have consciously subscribed; their faith in the medium became an unwilling accomplice to the underlying forces of emerging capitalism. Similarly, Hardt and Negri have tried to show the underlying common ground between avant-garde postmodernism and a global form of capitalism, which 'crisis is immanent to and indistinguishable from' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 386). Literature's role as an oppositional practice and its relationship to the political has thus continuously been both highlighted and contested.

In a talk given late in 2008, the Galway-based poet Moya Cannon noted that 'nobody starts to write poetry because they are a very balanced person. They write because they're conflicted' (Cannon, 2008). Cannon's words exemplify how strong the belief in an underlying conflict or crisis continues to be in contemporary views on poetry. They also show how little this belief has changed during the past centuries: the British liberal spokesman Thomas Babington Macaulay noted in the early nineteenth century, albeit in a much more unappreciative tone when it came to the poetic minds of his time, that 'Perhaps no person can be a poet, or can even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind' (quoted in Dawson, 1993, p. 66). Both Cannon and Dawson also link this inner conflict to the workings of the surrounding society at large. For Cannon, the internal and internalized conflicts of poetry find their parallels in the wider contexts of cultural dialogue: 'as cultural tectonic plates rub against each other, that's when poetry happens' (Cannon, 2008). For Macaulay, it is society's turmoil that gives rise to poetic idealism: 'In a rude state of society men are children with a greater variety of ideas. It is therefore in such a state of society that we may expect to find the poetical temperament in its highest perfection' (Dawson, 1993, p. 66). Macaulay's words may have been far from praising, but it is noteworthy that two figures so far removed in historical and cultural context – as well as in their respective views on the value of poetry – so firmly believe in personal and social conflict as a prerequisite for the emergence of poetry.

Indeed, the fate of poetry, inasmuch as it has evolved throughout the past couple of centuries, is in various ways tied to the crises of society from which it arises, as well as their pressures on the poetic medium itself. In Paul Muldoon's poem on the Auden circle in the USA, '7 Middagh Street', this link is at one stage given an ironic overstatement: just arrived in New York, his Auden proclaims that 'history's a twisted root / with art its small, translucent fruit // and never the other way round' (Muldoon, 2000, p. 178). Though one should avoid simplification – as Muldoon does later on in the poem by contrasting this position with the more committed stance of Louis MacNeice – poetry might nevertheless be said to draw its energy from the various points and phases of societal transformation, which also repeatedly call its own existence and efficacy into question. It is here that the crisis of poetry should be seen more in the sense of the Greek *krinein*, as turning point, separation and judgement; only through the constant repositioning of itself in relation to the forces that surround it can poetry continue to justify its own existence. While twentieth-century poetry has in many ways sought to challenge the hegemony of the conflicted subject as a basis for poetic expression,³ few would deny that a certain presupposition of a conflict, resistance or rebellion, often against the established notions of poetry's form and/or function, continues to be one of the driving forces of poetry as we understand it: the struggle of poetry with both tradition and innovation is what keeps it alive. For Stéphane Mallarmé, in his famous *Crise de Vers*, (French) poetry in turns flourished and stagnated as it sought either to conform to prevailing conventions or to rise above them:

It sparkles for a while, dies down, then waits; it disappears altogether or perhaps wears away to the naked thread; there is repetition. Yet now [...] the poetic urge continues with renewed, through different, sparkle, responding to new circumstances.

(Mallarmé [1895] 1980, p. 3)

Without an element of crisis, the grounds for poetry's own survival can be questioned. According to Paul de Man's iconoclastic argument in 'Criticism and Crisis' (which links closely to Mallarmé's article) such difficult moments are necessary in order to attain a crystallization of poetry's own singularity: 'We can speak of crisis when a "separation" takes place, by self-reflection, between what, in literature, is in conformity with the original intent and what has irrevocably fallen away from this source' (de Man, 1983, p. 8). Yet other voices would claim

that the ascetic and innovation-hungry nature of the poetic modernism that followed in the wake of Mallarmé and other French Symbolists is more aptly diagnosed as a cause for crisis than as a fruitful response.⁴ Certainly, if poetry is to be an alternative to, rather than a simple abettor of, the news media's sensationalism, then it must scrupulously question its own medium and *ethos*.

The poet Geoffrey Hill has called attention to the pervasiveness of what he calls the 'Entertainment overkill' (Hill, 1998, p. 27), acknowledging the Romantic William Wordsworth as a precedent for his own sceptical, sidelong glance on how poetry must find its own voice at a distance to that of the news media. According to this view, poetry can aspire to a more meditative and less self-serving vantage point on the issues that plunge the world into collective turmoil. The chapters in this collection attempt to do something similar on behalf of literary criticism – rearticulating the position of poetry in light of some of the central crises of recent decades, while also keeping an eye on certain elements of continuity with poetry written in the last couple of hundred years. In some ways these crises are new and specific to our age, in others they resemble questions that are much less so. If the Romantics responded to what they perceived as a crisis of artistic expression, the human community and the rural landscape at the rise of industrial capitalism, poets in the new millennium are faced with the challenges of the global marketplace where humans, both as members of communities and as individuals, are constantly subjected to the impersonal forces of the market economy. Similarly, if the perceived threats of 'the smoking chimneys and noisy factories' to nature and the countryside concerned the Romantics (Dawson, 1993, p. 67), the escalating ecological crisis of our days has in recent years been attracting an increasing number of responses from poets. And if the 'age of revolution' was concerned with the 'universal human values of freedom and equality', the rise of minority groups and their claim for a voice in an increasingly multicultural society has led to a continuation of struggles with questions of identity, difference and social justice.

The focus of this volume is on those events and dilemmas that both society and poetry have faced in the past sixty years or so, in other words during the period experienced first hand by the generations forming our contemporary society. The poetry discussed in this collection addresses crises from the Holocaust to the fall of the Twin Towers, from the marginalization of ethnic minorities and the destruction of the environment to the 'war on terror'. At the same time, these events have influenced various ways of questioning the role of poetic discourse

and reception. The organization of this volume is thus based upon an understanding that crisis, in contemporary poetry, is not a simple or easily-defined phenomenon, but rather a condition that moves through the entire communicative chain. This can be illustrated via the schematics of Roman Jakobson's landmark essay 'Linguistics and Poetics' (Jakobson, 1987).⁵ Famously, Jakobson suggested that evaluation of linguistic and poetic discourse requires an awareness not only of the 'message' of the poem or other verbal utterance, but also of the speaker (addresser) and the listener/reader (addressee) – as well as the functions of context, contact and code. Context makes the message 'graspable by the addressee' (and may be either 'verbal or capable of being verbalized'), a common code makes it possible for the addresser to encode and the addressee to decode the message, and contact signifies 'the physical channel and physiological connection between the addresser and the addressee' (*ibid.*, p. 66).

Thus, the chapters by John Sears, Mary Kate Azcuy and Scott Brewster in Part I of this book focus on the addresser: on poetic responses to, and encodings of, events of crisis. Analysing poetry from the Holocaust to the fall of the Twin Towers, they confront the understanding of poetry as a lyric phenomenon that, in Jakobson's terms, aims for 'a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he [or she] is talking about' (*ibid.*) They relate to late twentieth-century debates on expressive subjectivity in poetry by demonstrating the ways in which material and historical turmoil force the poetry to highlight and question its own devices (in line with Jakobson's 'poetic function'). Part II, which is centred on Northern Irish poetry (with essays by Ruben Moi, Seán Crosson, Stephen Regan and Charles I. Armstrong) scrutinizes the factor of 'context' in Jakobson's model inasmuch as it focuses on the various attempts by poets to communicate to an audience one specific experience of historical crisis in the twentieth century, one particularly intensely approached through poetry, namely the Northern Irish Troubles. Jakobson notes that even though 'an orientation toward the context – briefly, the so-called REFERENTIAL, "denotative", "cognitive" function – is the leading task of numerous messages, the accessory participation of the other functions in such messages must be taken into account' (*ibid.*, p. 66). Thus the questioning of the linguistic and poetic medium's capacity to grasp the particular events to which they respond has been a constant preoccupation for poets from Northern Ireland, and is also examined in the chapters here. Part III, on place and landscape, emphasizes the factor of contact, and the function of the phatic in Jakobson's terms: in the essays by Brendan Corcoran, Lucy

Collins, Janne Stigen Drangsholt and Anne Karhio, emphasis is on the materiality of place and the materiality of language, and the possibility of establishing a channel of communication. Finally, the essays by Guinn Batten, Eva Mueller-Zettelmann and Deirdre Osborne in Part IV examine poetry from the point of view of its audience's expectations and/or reactions, in other words from the point of view of the function of the addressee, be he or she representative of the critic (Batten), the literary community (Mueller-Zettelmann) or the culturally determined expectations of the audience (Osborne). In Jakobson's terms, such approaches stress what he calls the 'conative' factor, placing emphasis on the implied recipient, and, at the same time, respondent.

The collection opens with a section devoted to the ways in which poetry's dealings with crisis raise difficult questions concerning personal and poetic identity, as poetry's lyric expressiveness is pushed to an uneasy limit. The Second World War looms large in this section, as it provokes poets to trace the effects of large-scale historical trauma on the individual. First of all, there is John Sears's essay 'Form, Historical Crisis and Poetry's Hope in George Szirtes's "Metro"', in which Sears finds Szirtes's poem centrally engaged with the challenges of representing crisis and trauma, in particular in regard to aspects of the Holocaust. For Sears it is the 'crisis of the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic' that Szirtes's work represents, a crisis the poet attempts to resolve by deferring to other writings in a work that addresses the life of Szirtes's mother – a survivor of a German concentration camp. Also considered here is the relationship between form and crisis within poetry and the failure of words to perform the challenge presented to them in times of crisis. Sears draws on Andrew Benjamin's interpretation of 'hope', by which hope is 'displaced into a future that exceeds the present', to account for how Szirtes in 'Metro' comes to terms with crisis by asserting continuity.

Similar existential concerns are evident in Mary Kate Azcuy's examination of Louise Glück's post 9/11 poem 'October', a poem engaging with a world in crisis through an analysis of personal history and mythology, in particular 'a double persona' depicted in the figure of Persephone. Azcuy explores the way in which Glück draws on her own traumatic childhood experiences, including fighting with anorexia, to uncover 'current trauma', while returning to the myth of Persephone and Demeter to engage with a collapse of order in the contemporary world. For Glück, Azcuy suggests, the risk of repeating trauma while narrating one's story may also lead to silence at the heart of poetic expression. Furthermore, Glück, as Azcuy contends, finds redemption

in the natural world and looks to the 'beauty of nature that has survived human atrocities' for hope.

After two chapters considering how, and how far, poetry can accommodate historically inflicted trauma, the subsequent contribution addresses how lyric poetry can turn away from expression altogether. In Scott Brewster's chapter, '*Herrn*: The Catastrophe of Lyric in John Burnside', Burnside's poetry is examined through Derrida's image of *le hérisson*, the hedgehog, which is able to turn in on itself for protection but simultaneously exposes itself to the risk of obliteration. Brewster's reading of Burnside focuses on questions of lyric subjectivity, and how this subjectivity in poetry is constantly poised between absolute privacy and secrecy on the one hand, and, on the other, 'the customary, the familiar and the shared'. The interplay of withdrawal and encounter with the other, the essay suggests, is apparent in Burnside's poetry, which is 'shadowed by a sense of threat and vulnerability that underlies this lyric moment'.

Part II, 'A Special Case', turns to poetry's response to a particular and recent instance of political crisis. The chapters in this section look at literature's negotiations with its context – especially through a focus on how poetry from Northern Ireland approaches the articulation of an understanding of key events and stages of the Northern Irish Troubles. The section opens with Ruben Moi's essay, "'In a ghostly pool of blood / a crumpled phantom hugged the mud": Spectropoetic Presentations of Bloody Sunday and the Crisis of Northern Ireland', which draws on Derrida's concept of *hauntology*, or responsibility 'beyond all living present'. Through this concept, Moi examines the crisis of Northern Ireland and in particular poetic representations of Bloody Sunday. Moi reflects on the centrality of this event to the Troubles, as the point at which 'the crisis of Northern Ireland culminated', and gives special attention to works, such as Thomas Kinsella's *Butcher's Dozen*, that made up for their frequent lack of nuance and subtlety with the fire and passion of their direct engagement with the actions of that day and the subsequent whitewash of the Widgery Tribunal. For Moi, the questioning of responsibility in a violent society has been central to Northern Irish poetry in the final decades of the twentieth century, and this questioning he finds most apparent in the various engagements of poets with the events of Bloody Sunday. In each instance, poets are challenged by calls to respond directly – to speak out, to represent, and to challenge injustice. Yet as Moi's study suggests, such a challenge is far from straightforward and, apart from the threats to life that may exist in such contested spaces, it is the challenge to poets who wish to

maintain their own artistic integrity – what Seamus Heaney has called ‘the central preoccupying questions’ (Heaney, 1980, p. 13) – that can be most difficult to resolve.

Seán Crosson’s chapter examines the place of traditional music in the poetry of Seamus Heaney in a time of crisis. Heaney’s attempts to come to terms with his own identity and poetic inheritance during the Troubles in Northern Ireland has been criticized for rehashing Romantic tropes of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, while failing to engage sufficiently critically with the contemporary realities around him. Crosson argues that these criticisms are also relevant to Heaney’s engagement with traditional music and song: the tradition Heaney draws from is largely that of Romantic and modernist aesthetics of poetry, where the function of art is seen in a highly individualized context. Much as the landscape has provided for Heaney a point of tradition, continuity and stability, traditional music has served a similar purpose in his poetry, connecting his work to an Irish tradition but without always acknowledging the communities from which this music has emerged or its political and social complexities, particularly in times of communal upheaval.

If Bloody Sunday marked perhaps the most profound moment of crisis in the early years of the Troubles, Stephen Regan’s chapter, ‘“Crisis first-hand”: Seamus Heaney before and after the Ceasefire’, chooses as its historical focal point the end of the period marked by civil unrest in Ireland’s North. Regan considers the creative challenges that face poets after an external crisis has subsided, in this case Northern Irish poetry after the ceasefire. As one commentator remarked ‘What are you going to write about now?’ The answer would seem to Regan to include ‘a distinctive preoccupation with memory, forgiveness and reconciliation’ as well as ‘sustained intertextual experimentation’. Regan focuses in particular here on the work of Seamus Heaney and begins by considering Heaney’s earlier engagement with the crisis of the Troubles, an engagement found wanting by other scholars but which Regan argues did include, when the occasion required it, speaking out ‘forcefully against the British media, the British government and the British army’. In the aftermath of the 1994 ceasefire, however, Regan recognizes a movement in Heaney’s poetry from ‘emblems of adversity’ (apparent, for example, in the Bog poem sequence of the 1970s), to ‘emblems of reconciliation and renewal’ in the post-ceasefire era.

One possible approach to poetic replies to the question addressed in Regan’s essay – of what poets are going to write about now – is by focusing on the dimension of the quotidian in Northern Irish poetry

and its relationship to crises, both personal and political, which is the central concern of Charles I. Armstrong's chapter. For Armstrong, the work of poets such as Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson and Leontia Flynn, reveals a recurring engagement with aspects of the everyday, though often for quite different purposes, varying from the transcendental to the transgressive. Armstrong argues that 'everyday epiphanies' have an important role to play for these poets in assisting them in finding points of reference in a crisis concerning our perceptual access to the world. However, he is careful to emphasize that such engagements are not immune to the 'ideological underpinnings of the everyday'.

Not only poetry's political contexts, but also the very setting and topographical frame in which poetry unfolds is now in a state of crisis. Although it has long been unfashionable to see nature as an issue even partially independent of political concerns,⁶ the recent ecological crisis has forced many to rethink these concepts. Reflecting such tendencies, the chapters in Part III consider, from different geographical and critical perspectives, questions of ecology, place and landscape.

The opening chapter of this section bridges the preceding chapters on lyric subjectivity and the Northern Irish conflict and concerns with place and landscape. In "'The memorial to all of them": Landscape and the Holocaust in the Poetry of Michael Longley', Brendan Corcoran reads Longley's poetry through its intertwining of poetic responsibility to remember with the ecological awareness of nature and landscape and with human destructiveness. The singularity of any act of atrocity, in particular the Holocaust, is brought into tension with the more universally human capabilities of destructive behaviour on the one hand, and, on the other, memory and grief. For Corcoran, Longley's engagement with the Holocaust 'suspends together the human voice of poetry with the vastness of atrocious death, not to redress such death but to imbricate human presence with its absence'. Simultaneously, however, Longley positions his own engagement with the historical events he did not personally witness in his reading of the landscape of Carrigskeewaun in county Mayo, and the burial sites that mark its graves, 'the literal place of the dead within the landscape'.

Ecological crisis and the potential of human destructiveness towards the natural world are the central concern of Lucy Collins's chapter, "'Toward a Brink": The Poetry of Kathleen Jamie and Environmental Crisis', which focuses on the work of the Scottish poet whose work reveals, Collins argues, 'the interwoven aspect of ecological concern' and 'its connections to social structures and personal events' as well

as to debates in the wider world. Collins reflects on the role of poetry as a potential agent for change, particularly with regard to a concern for nature, an important 'form of political engagement' so long as issues of power are inseparable from the relationship of humans to the natural world. She examines Jamie's exploration of the interaction of the human and the natural world in her 2004 collection *The Tree House*, where poems such as 'The Wishing Tree' emphasize 'the need to engage with nature as equal not as master'. As Collins argues, Jamie's collection is 'shaped by the idea that human understanding can be fundamentally altered by renewed attentiveness to what already surrounds us – a core prerequisite of environmental reform'.

Janne Stigen Drangsholt notes the increasingly problematic identification between 'subject and landscape' that has developed with the rise of the postmodern idiom and its resulting in 'a kind of "crisis poetry"', where the poetic subject is unable to place itself in any kind of "scape". Yet for Stigen Drangsholt, British poetry remains characterized by 'the thematization of landscape' as poets attempt to counter the sense of crisis through 'attempts at articulating a landscape or a sense of place', a place that is often constructed in quite different ways. She is particularly interested in how this process develops within Alice Oswald's poetry, 'frequently structured in terms of movement'. Stigen Drangsholt's analysis – which draws on readings of Romantic poetry by Harold Bloom and Martin Heidegger – foregrounds Oswald's focus on the natural environment while acknowledging Oswald's own contestation of her description as a 'nature poet'. In her readings of poems from Oswald's collections *Dart* (2002) and *Woods etc.* (2006), she finds a crucial connection between an understanding of place and an understanding of self, while the importance of opening 'oneself up to the difference of the other' is central to the title poem of the 2006 collection.

The interrelationship between materiality of place and language provides the focus of the last chapter in Part III: Anne Karhio's interpretation of the relationship between place and narrative in Muldoon's long poems. This chapter is framed by the responsibilities and relationship of poets to politics in Northern Ireland, and its affinity with such debates in the United States. Karhio focuses principally on the narrative elements in three of Muldoon's long poems, each taken from a separate point in his career – 'The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants', 'Yarrow' and the title poem of the 2006 collection *Horse Latitudes* – and 'how they operate in portraying crisis and place' or 'crisis in place'. Within this analysis, she also outlines the development of form in poetry from the Romantics to the modernists, and the relationship

of this legacy to more recent postmodern poetics. Karhio calls for the need to 'address both crisis of the narrative as well as narratives of crisis in poetry' and emphasizes the importance of considering the formal elements of Muldoon's poems as meaningful in relation to their more social and political concerns.

The chapters in Part IV, the final section of the book, address the interpretative frameworks of contemporary poetry: who reads and makes critical judgements on this poetry, and on what basis are these hermeneutical gestures made? Poetry's addressees are brought to the forefront here, reflecting a sense of crisis concerning poetry's audience that arguably has been a recurring feature since the first onslaught of modernism on Britain and Ireland. The work of Paul Muldoon is again the topic of the first chapter of the section, 'Paul Muldoon: Critical Judgement, the Crisis Poem, and the Ethics of Voice', in which Guinn Batten provides a discussion of the politics of the crisis poem and the frequent intersection of foreign and personal affairs. The essay highlights the function of judgement, not only on the part of the poet but also on that of the critic. Taking as her starting point what she considers critical misreadings of Paul Muldoon's poetic sequences 'Madoc' and 'Horse Latitudes', Batten argues that 'the idea that references not only are inevitably missed but, indeed, sometimes should be missed, is central to Muldoon's ethics of poetic voice in a time of crisis'. While relating the Special Powers Act enacted in Northern Ireland during the Troubles with the Homeland Security Act of the post-9/11 United States, Batten suggests, employing the ideas of Walter Benjamin, that 'crisis may become [...] the everyday condition of rule of law that creates what Muldoon would call "the doldrums" of our time'.

Eva Mueller-Zettelmann's essay 'Displacing the Crisis: New British Poetry, Cultural Memory and the Role of the Intellectual' addresses the existence of competing views of poetry's position in the contemporary British culture of poetry. Mueller-Zettelmann begins by remarking on the huge number of articles, editorials and public lectures devoted to the topic of a perceived crisis in British poetry, the result of its allegedly increasingly marginalized position in society. Her analysis explores the contending voices of what Michael Schmidt has called the 'game-keepers' of contemporary poetry, thereby attempting to unearth the underlying issues in this sense of crisis, and is framed by the respective addresses to the St Andrews Poetry Festival (StAnza) of Neil Astley and Michael Schmidt. Mueller-Zettelmann charts a dialectic in British poetry that is apparent in these two presentations, from a concern with giving readers what they want (Astley) to those who believe editors and

publishers are failing to alert readers to 'precisely those characteristics that make poetry special' (Schmidt). However, despite rumours to the contrary, Mueller-Zettelmann finds British poetry to be in a relatively healthy state. Thus, the perception of crisis in British poetry has more to do with social than with literary factors – particularly as the notion of Britishness itself comes under increasing pressure and poets seek to 'bring forth an elevating self-image for a nation in crisis'.

The final chapter of the book, Deirdre Osborne's 'The Body of Text Meets the Body as Text: Staging (I)dentify in the work of SuAndi and Lemn Sissay', is a study of two indigenous black British poets, SuAndi and Lemn Sissay, and is concerned with the various crises that can face minority ethnicities in their attempts to articulate themselves against 'canonical traditions of literary poetry'. If Mueller-Zettelmann's essay proposes that the suggested crisis of British poetry is really a crisis of the national ideals of poetry, Osborne examines the dilemmas facing those marginalized by such ideals. She looks at the two writers' efforts to assert distinctive voices from the margins, voices that reflect, and are shaped by, societal crises of repression, marginalization and racism within a white majority culture. In the process, SuAndi and Sissay are attempting to reshape the expectations of their audience. Osborne's examination is cognizant of both the implied and explicit implications of context – from literary legacies to poetic traditions and socio-cultural factors – and 'its effect upon meaning'. She focuses in particular on two self-performed monodramas, *Something Dark* (Sissay) and *The Story of M* (SuAndi), work which foregrounds the personal voice to stage the poets own '(I)dentify assertions'.

As this overview of the contributions to this collection indicates, the chapters below obviously cover no more than a small part of all the possible ways in which poetry can be said to address the notion of crisis, no matter which function of Jakobson's communicative scheme they can be seen to emphasize (or deem problematic). Neither can they claim culturally or geographically to cover the contemporary human and literary experience in any exhaustive way: the focus of this volume is narrowed down to poetry in English, with an emphasis on poetry from Britain, Ireland and North America. The volume includes chapters concerned with the work of established poets such as Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon and Louise Glück, but also includes fresh and, arguably, more marginalized voices, like those discussed by Deirdre Osborne. Despite its limitations, this collection aims to frame the kinds of challenges that poetry is facing in the new millennium. If, as Auden intimates, the effects of crisis will probably not leave us for long – 'We must suffer

them all again', as he writes in 'September 1, 1939' – then both poetry and the interpretation of poetry might make us better qualified to rise to the occasion once they return.

Notes

1. According to Harvey, 'The depression that swept out of Britain in 1846–1847 and which quickly engulfed the whole of what was then the capitalist world, can justly be regarded as the first unambiguous crisis of capitalist overaccumulation. [...] the crisis of 1847–8 created a crisis of representation, and that this latter crisis itself derived from a radical readjustment in the sense of time and space in economic, political and cultural life' (Harvey, 1990, p. 260).
2. Indeed, Moynagh Sullivan has drawn attention to how a sense of ongoing crisis has been seminal to the critical discourses around Ireland, its culture and literature; see Sullivan (2005, p. 451).
3. Marjorie Perloff, for example, has shown how in the works of several contemporary American poets, the personal 'is not necessarily equivalent to the inward-looking gaze of the psychologically complex subject' (Perloff, 1996, p. 183).
4. For such a view on modernism, see for instance Eavan Boland: 'The Wrong Way' (Boland, 2000, pp. 215–18).
5. Jakobson's essay is based on a lecture in 1958 at a conference held in Indiana University, and was subsequently revised and first published in Thomas Sebeok (ed.) *Style in Language*. This introduction refers to the version published in *Language in Literature*, edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (1987).
6. Jonathan Bate has noted how the emergence of the 'polis' (the Greek root for 'political') may by definition be seen to mark a fall from nature as a phenomenologically experienced domain (Bate, 2000, p. 266).

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