

‘Norms and Forms’: 10 Years of the British & Irish Poets e-mail list

British and Irish Poets is an e-mail list hosted by the National Academic Mailing List Service, known as JISCmail.¹ JISCmail is an online tool to promote communication in the UK-based academic community, though its subscriber base is international. Subscribers to British and Irish Poets, like the members of any JISCmail list, receive a copy of each email posted to the list, either at the moment of posting, or in a daily digest format. It is possible to search the list archive through the JISCmail site.

The British and Irish Poets list was begun by Richard Caddel in 1996. Initially just ‘British Poets’, the title of the list was expanded to British and Irish Poets in 2001, though this change was not registered with JISCmail until early in 2007. To the perpetual irritation of its Irish members and managers, it picked up the nickname ‘Britpo’, which has never been entirely suppressed, despite Mairéad Byrne’s spirited suggestion that the accepted abbreviation should be B&I, in homage to the defunct Irish Sea ferry company B&I Line.² The list has been managed by successive teams of ‘list owners’ (JISCmail’s term); the current owners of the list being Mairéad Byrne and Ian Davidson. Despite their rather proprietorial title, the list owners have fairly limited powers. They do not censor or delete posts to the list, though they have the power to suspend or ban users who break the list’s rules. There are about 240 subscribers to the list: an

¹Notes

British and Irish Poets, JISCmail, <<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/british-irish-poets.html>>. Accessed 10th April 2007.

² Mairéad Byrne, ‘B&I’, *British and Irish Poets*, (10th October 2006). Accessed 11th April 2007.

international grouping by no means confined to Britain and Ireland. Few of these have been members since the beginning of the list, though one or two remain. Most subscribers are 'lurkers' – people who (presumably) read the list, but rarely contribute. Regular contributors constitute a small group of maybe 10-15% of the membership.

Like most JISCMail lists, British and Irish Poets performs a number of functions. Members may use the list to discuss poetry and criticism, to ask questions, to link to websites of interest to the membership, to advertise upcoming events and publications, to review books, readings, festivals and conferences, and to post their own work. Some of these things happen much more often than others, and I'll try to suggest some reasons for that below.

When I first started to read B&I, in 2003, subscribers were greeted with a welcome message (which I quote in the title of this essay) explaining the interests of the list in the following terms:

British and Irish Poets orients itself towards the contestation and contestability of norms and forms both in and through poetry. We recognise that ideas as to how this might and can be achieved will vary, often vigorously, and the list seeks to promote such vigour. Debatable terms such as 'innovative', 'linguistically-innovative', 'experimental' and 'new' are not out of place here. Once again their interpretation is part of the robust nature of the list.³

This message has now been replaced with one whose tone is informative, rather than manifesto-making:

British and Irish Poets (B&I Poets) is a poetry listserv focused on non-mainstream traditions of Irish and British poetry, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries. [...] The current focus of the list is on work that

³ cris cheek and Trevor Joyce, 'Welcome Message', *British and Irish Poets*. In Mairéad Byrne, 'Welcome message', email to Kit Fryatt, 26th November 2006.

is often described as 'postmodern', 'innovative' or 'experimental'. [...] The capacities and limitations of categories and definitions have themselves been subjects of vigorous debate on the list, as have the possible meanings of 'British and Irish', in the fluid terms of poetry.⁴

Byrne and Davidson's version of the welcome message places the 'vigorous debates' about terminology and identity in the continuous past implied by the perfect tense. This is not necessarily because of any sense that these are now settled questions, or there is no longer a need for manifestoes in poetry, but because they have excited such ire in the past that a temperate tone seems prudent. Discussions about such 'debatable terms' can become bewilderingly arcane and vociferous: the list archive for January and February 2005 records a choice example centering on the term 'academic verse'. This did mutate eventually into a genuinely valuable discussion of the value of MFA programmes in poetry. Equally often, however, such spats over terminology sputter out into mutual frustration or continue into areas very remote from poetry and poetics. The format of an e-mail exchange lends itself to elaborate refinements of definition, but it is sometimes hard not to grow impatient with B&I's nitpicking.

Like most online communities, B&I can be bafflingly cliquish, generating with equal regularity exclusive in-jokes and protests about all the exclusive in-jokes. A more irascible exclusivity emerges when an uninformed visitor posts a message out of step with the list's interests and prejudices. A tendency to bemoan exclusion from a cultural centre dominated by identitarianism and formal flaccidity while at the same time fiercely guarding peripheral credentials is still

⁴ Mairéad Byrne and Ian Davidson, 'Welcome Message', *British and Irish Poets* (January 2007) Accessed 11th April 2007.

evident in both British and Irish neo-modernism, as is a certain amount of automatic bashing of the mainstream. Status-hungry and mock-populist statements such as Don Paterson's plea for poets to be regarded as tradesmen in his 2004 T.S. Eliot lecture – 'Only plumbers can plumb, roofers roof and drummers drum; only poets can write poetry' – get savaged on B&I, where a more high-minded list might consider them beneath notice.⁵ Shooting fish in a barrel is fun, and by no means confined to neo-modernism. But this entertaining blood-sport has the potential to retard criticism sympathetic to neo-modernism, making it reactive and provincial when the poetry it engages is inventive and internationalist.

Despite being occasionally maddened by B&I, I continue to subscribe, always scan the daily digest that appears in my email inbox, occasionally contribute. Its archives are one of a few sites that I recommend to students and others who want to find out more about 'different' poetry. It's been going for as long as (or longer than) most people have been familiar with the Web, and as such represents a very substantial volume of comment. The new welcome message recognizes B&I's status as a resource for readers, and requests: 'Please keep in mind, when you are posting, that you are contributing to a valuable archive.' (It remains to be seen whether this memorandum will have the desired effect on member etiquette.)

There are a couple of things that don't happen on B&I, though, or don't happen much. The first of these is an undoubted blessing, the second I miss and

⁵ Don Paterson, 'The Dark Art of Poetry' *The Poetry Library*, South Bank Centre, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.org.uk/news/poetryscene/?id=20>>. Accessed 17th April 2007.

regret, since it doesn't seem to happen very often on the Web at all. Blessings first. B&I contributors don't post their poems for comment. Posting of poems is encouraged by the list managers, but it's an invitation accepted by very few; the regular exception being the indefatigable Jeff Harrison, who posts a poem every couple of days. Critique of a posted poem is quite taboo, it seems (this is an unwritten rule), an almost unalloyed good in a poetic climate in which workshops are posited as a cure-all. Poems reside in the archives as threads in themselves, accessible but with no critical apparatus.

Also rare on B&I is the experience of close reading as a communal activity, a conversation. Neither the relatively formal, structured close study of poems which takes place in academic seminars, nor the kind of informal and spontaneous discussion which usually ends with the participants knee-deep in books pulled off the shelf to make a point, has an online equivalent on B&I, or indeed, elsewhere on the Web. The lack of practical critical conversation on the B&I list prompted me to consider some of the obstacles to establishing such a dialogue. As noted above, the e-mail exchange format lends itself to discussion of filigree precision, with sometimes exasperating results. It's just that those discussions tend to apply themselves to the vocabulary of criticism rather than the vocabulary of poems themselves. Attention to the political, social or poetic-factional implications of language use, with participants challenged repeatedly to define their terms, leads further from the original comment or query until it is forgotten altogether.

Neo-modernist poetics need not be unsympathetic to close reading in itself. Indeed, it's hard to see how it can be, when contemporary neo-modernist groupings owe so much both to Language poetry and to Cambridge formalism. And yet, in expressing reservations about the value of close reading it is precisely these formalist tendencies – the word 'academic' gets used a lot – that are identified as a problem. In response to a query I posted on B&I about the relation between close reading and neo-modernist practice, Tim Allen, editor of the online magazine *Terriblework*, posted this:

I would hazard a guess that there are very few such poets who have not indulged in close reading, either instinctively or through intellectual habit, of both their own and others' material. The reflexivity necessary would be a real struggle without it.

This is not to say that close reading is always beneficial – a certain type of close reading when practised by certain personalities seems to actually prevent them from writing anything themselves, or it can make them write stale and lifeless stuff, the kind of thing we used to call 'academic verse' – you could recognise it a mile off. One of the problems we are experiencing at the moment, and this is another can of worms, is that in many cases current "academic verse" looks and sounds so much like the kind of thing that the avant [-garde] crowd have been producing for years, but I digress. Speaking for myself, close reading of my own and others' poetry has been vital for both understanding and practice.⁶

(That 'can of worms', inevitably, was opened, and close reading soon forgotten in the welter of definitions of 'academic' and 'avant-garde'.) This statement is interesting on a number of points. First, that close reading might be an 'instinctive' reflex for certain readers is borne out by my own experience of working on poetry with university students of English – some grasp the principles of close reading rapidly and are quick to apply them to other forms of criticism,

⁶ Tim Allen, 'So much rubbish everywhere', *British and Irish Poets* (2nd February 2005) Accessed 29th March 2007.

others never accommodate themselves to it. Their protests often take the inchoate form of 'I don't like dissecting poems; it kills them', which means, I think, that the student wants to engage with the process of the poem's composition, but lacks critical vocabulary with which to do it. Approaching my query from a pedagogical perspective, Rupert Mallin replied,

I understand critical practice but have a problem with 'practical criticism.' Here in my hand is *The Practical Criticism of Poetry* – a textbook – edited by C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson (1969). As textbooks go it's good for its time, employing the 'direct method' of seminar discussion to analyse poems. Because it works out of that discussion, contrary and contradictory opinions mix with a body of questions. OK to this point. Yet, if the poet isn't dead, the text lies there dead. Nothing wrong with dead poems at all! However, we can't engage with the practice and method of the poet thereby. Even in this textbook, the lively questioning runs into the wall of history and its weight. Indeed, despite the students' enthusiasm, even this criteria of criticism builds their critical faculties as it closes doors on their own practice. Hence I'm nervous about 'criticism.'⁷

The extent to which we still lack a shared critical vocabulary which can articulate 'process' in poetry is illustrated by Allen and Mallin's independent use of the same metaphor employed by the typical frustrated student: the poem as corpse.

An opposition between poetries of 'process' and 'product' doesn't get us much further, since almost all poems are both commodities and instances of temporizing rhetoric. Nor does that opposition map neatly onto the modernist / mainstream one: Neo-modernists may 'set out in determined opposition to the idea of writing as a consumer item', as J.C.C. Mays writes of Trevor Joyce,⁸ but the close relationship of neo-modernist poetry to small-press and limited edition

⁷ Rupert Mallin, 'So much rubbish everywhere', *British and Irish Poets* (1st February 2005). Accessed 29th March 2007.

⁸ J.C.C Mays, 'Scriptor ignotus, with the fire in him now [The Poetry of Trevor Joyce]' *Dublin Review* 6 (Spring 2002) 42-65, 59.

publishing means that innovative poetry often comes packaged as a desirable object; meanwhile the referential relationship between text and world that is a given in much mainstream work alerts us to the temporality of its language.

There's a conflict in neo-modernist critical thinking about practical criticism, which can be explained in a literary-historical sense by the phenomenon Allen refers to – the partial absorption of principles of innovative poetry into an Establishment mode. Neo-modernist scepticism about close reading is partly oppositional: a reaction against a critical practice that has made peripheral poetics palatable (and susceptible to dilution by) a dominant centre. And yet close reading remains essential to neo-modernist practice: 'the reflexivity necessary would be a real struggle without it', by which Allen seems to mean both self-reflexivity and intertextuality.

The response of many B&I contributors to my reflections might be that the quality of posts to the list has declined, and that discussion has largely been replaced by links and advertisement. Many members have left because of this perceived drop in standards. I don't share their pessimism, though it is clear that the list has changed. In 1996, the subscribers shared interests and reference points to a far greater degree than they do today. There were also far fewer online resources for the discussion of poetry, less competition for contributors' attention and efforts. It is in the nature of online communities to mutate, and sometimes to die off altogether, but long before they do, they generate complaints of a nostalgic nature. The earliest threads of this kind that I have

found in the B&I archive date from 2001 (a more diligent eye might find earlier ones);⁹ somehow the list has staggered on for another six years.

In Internet terms, B&I is elderly, and its email-list format primitive. And yet its superannuated format might be the reason for its dogged survival. An email list is not a forum, which you can choose to visit, log into and in which discussion is separated into themed threads. It is not a monologic blog, in which any comment is dependent upon and addressed, at least in the first instance, to the blogger. As long as you choose to subscribe, B&I mails will continue to come into your mailbox. Their content may hold little interest for you, or it may hold much, but they are difficult to ignore entirely. The email list offers the possibility of receiving the unexpected as mail. And an interest in the 'unexpected', better than any of the 'contested or debatable' terms – 'postmodern', 'innovative', 'experimental' – unites the subscribers to British and Irish Poets.

⁹ See Lawrence Upton, 'Re: british-poets list changes', *British and Irish Poets* (2nd March 2001). Accessed 17th April 2007.