

Module Title: The ‘Schools’ of Contemporary Poetry

Dr Will Fleming

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10 ECTS

Junior Sophister Option

Module Description:

‘Grouping writers into “schools” has always been problematic’. Thus begins Jonathan Creasy’s introduction to an anthology of work by poets variously associated with North Carolina’s legendary Black Mountain College. This module explores the importance of the so-called poetic ‘school’ or ‘movement’ to our critical understanding of the wider course of poetic production in what we might call the long contemporary period. Considering several such coteries from a number of anglophone contexts since the 1950s, we will analyse poetic works by a diverse range of poets relative to the community orientations in which they were written. Addressing such groupings as the Movement, the Cambridge School, the Caribbean Artists Movement, the Irish neo-modernists, and the New York School, our objective is to interrogate the apparently ‘problematic’ nature of training this community-oriented lens on the work of individual poets. What are the formal and thematic decisions which bind such poets together under such seemingly arbitrary headings? To what extent does this approach foreclose on other lines of influence? Why do some ‘schools’ of poetry prioritise geographical location while others prioritise aesthetics? Is the poetry anthology productive or counterproductive as a critical rubric? Is a ‘school’ of poets always an organic designation, or is it sometimes retroactively applied? Can it offer unique insight into material and social conditions, and is this always at the expense of responsible close reading? Does a broader understanding of such ‘schools’ deepen our grasp of what ‘contemporary’ poetry is? These are the kinds of questions at the centre of this module, with particular emphasis on how such contextual work helps or hinders our literary interpretations of work by poets such as Thom Gunn, Denise Riley, Frank O’Hara, Ellen Dillon, Kamau Brathwaite, and Verity Spott.

Module Content (subject to change):

Week 1: Introduction: The Faber Poets and the Inheritances of High Modernism

Week 2: The Movement

Week 3: The New York School

Week 4: The Confessional Poets

Week 5: The Cambridge School of Poets

Week 6: The Irish Neo-Modernists

Week 7: Reading Week

Week 8: The Caribbean Artists Movement

Week 9: The Black Mountain Poets

Week 10: The Poetry Society Takeover

Week 11: The Beat Poets

Week 12: Conclusion: The Poetry School Today

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this module, a student should be able to:

- Demonstrate a detailed contextual knowledge of several of the most prominent poetic movements and coteries of the long contemporary period (1950–present);
- Weigh broader contextual analyses of such poetic ‘schools’ against more in-depth, critically informed close readings of work by a diverse range of poets;
- Recognise the importance of distinguishing between the retroactive application of group labels for the sake of expediency and the range of formal and thematic innovations which tend to hide behind such labels;
- Exhibit a nuanced understanding of how and why we tend to approach the broad church of so-called contemporary poetry as a collection of discrete community orientations in scholarship.

Learning Aims:

This module aims to provide students with the skills to:

- Evaluate and close read a wide variety of different kinds of poetry alongside, as well as in spite of, the many contextual frameworks in which they are written;
- Responsibly approach critical rubrics which privilege things like geographical location and literary influence over subtle compositional variations between individual proponents;
- Be conversant with several of the major formal poetic innovations of the long contemporary period;
- Display a broad understanding of the history of anglophone poetry since 1950.

Assessment Details:

- *Number of component(s):* 1
- *Name/Type of Component(s):* Essay
- *Word Count of Component(s):* 5,000
- *Percentage Value of Component(s):* 100%

Preliminary Reading List:

Primary Reading:

Each seminar will focus on a representative range of poems and excerpts from longer works pertaining to the ‘school’ or ‘group’ under consideration that week (to be decided in due course). These are likely to be drawn from the following anthologies, which students are advised to dip into in preparation for the module:

- *British Poetry since 1945* (Penguin, 1970), edited by Edward Lucie-Smith (‘The Movement’ section)

- *The New York Poets: An Anthology* (Carcanet, 2004), edited by Mark Ford
- *Eight American Poets: An Anthology* (Knopf Doubleday, 1997), edited by Joel Connaroe (The Confessional Poets)
- *A Various Art* (Carcanet, 1987), edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville (The Cambridge School of Poets)
- *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2001), edited by Keith Tuma (for such Irish neo-modernists as Trevor Joyce, Maurice Scully, Randolph Healy, and Catherine Walsh)
- *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (Bloodaxe, 1989), edited by E.A. Markham
- *Black Mountain Poems: An Anthology* (Norton, 2020), edited by Jonathan C. Creasy
- *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (Wesleyan University Press, 1999), edited by Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain
- *Beat Poets* (Everyman, 2002), edited by Carmela Ciuraru

Secondary Reading:

- Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Salt Publishing, 2006)
- C.D. Blanton, 'Transatlantic Currents'. *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (Wiley Blackwell, 2009)
- Lucy Collins, *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement* (Liverpool University Press, 2015)
- Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Romana Huk (editor), *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003)
- Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now* (Stanford University Press, 2016)
- David Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modernity: On Irish Poetry and Modernism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022)
- Luke Roberts, *Living in History: Poetry in Britain, 1945–1979* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024)
- Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (Chatto & Windus, 2012)
- Sophie Seita, *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital* (Stanford University Press, 2019)
- Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (University of Iowa Press, 2006)
- Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Northwestern University Press, 1998)
- Juha Virtanen, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960–1980: Event and Effect* (Palgrave, 2017)