*New Verse* (literary periodical)

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*New Verse* was a British literary magazine founded by Hugh Ross Williamson (1901-1978) and Geoffrey Grigson (1905-1985). Essentially Grigson’s hobbyhorse, this little magazine would become an influential player in London’s literary and publishing circles during the 1930s, with the young editor serving as chief publisher and curator for the entirety of *New Verse*’s six-year run (roughly thirty issues, ranging from January 1933 to May 1939). The publication—with its emphasis on observation, the everyday, and socially attuned poetry, however contradictorily channelled through Grigson’s editorial choices—played a key role in the dissemination, commentary, and early praise of the so-called New Country poets: Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and most centrally, W.H. Auden.

Collectively known by the somewhat derisive moniker ‘MacSpaunday,’ this second wave of modernist poetic innovators positioned themselves in quasi opposition to the traditionally minded mythopoeic aesthetics exemplified by older modernist poets like Eliot, Pound, and Yeats. While not denying the influence of their predecessors, and in many ways building on their achievements, the New Country poets’ work sought to radicalize their legacy, and to become deeply embedded in the socio-economic and cultural anxieties of that fateful decade—a precarious time bookended by two World Wars and punctuated by global market upheavals, socialist revolutions, and polarizing civil and cultural divides. The ‘newness’ in *New Verse*, therefore, calls attention to the urgency of the moment, to the experience of living in unprecedented times and circumstances, as well as to the need for a new, less rarefied, more direct poetic response. Catering neither to the mainstream reader nor to the ‘clique-puffery’ of the literary elite, Grigson saw his editorial mission in the pages of *New Verse* as one which fit perfectly well with the new poetics of observation and social involvement exemplified by the new worldly attitude and poetic perspective fashioned by the Auden circle.

In the magazine’s inaugural issue (January 1933) Grigson elaborated a kind of pragmatic manifesto or aesthetic road map of sorts for his fledgling literary venture. Describing *New Verse* as a bi-monthly publication exclusively devoted to poetry, he framed this exclusivist gesture as a protest against a literary landscape in which poets ‘no longer have periodical means of communicating their poems.’ Grigson’s selling point is true, to a point, insofar as before the appearance of the like-minded ‘new’ poetry periodical, *Twentieth Century Verse* (1937-9), published and edited by Julian Symons*, New Verse* was the only London literary review devoted exclusively to poetry and poetics. Nevertheless, the young Grigson’s accusation served mainly as a provocative and boisterous claim against the new magazine’s more established literary competitors (such as Eliot’s by this time well-established and reputable *The* *Criterion*). Seeking to differentiate itself as much as it could, Grigson’s opening salvo also called for a new kind of poetics, one perhaps less decorous and pernickety about the sacred divide between the high and the low.

In his preface to the retrospective anthology of *New Verse* poetry published by Faber & Faber in 1939, Grigson echoed his earlier inaugural pronouncement, dismissing what he perceived as the retrograde ideological disposition that insisted on the distinction between, for instance, a limerick and an epic poem. For Grigson, however whimsical a reader might find the jingles of the former, and however anachronistic she might find the heroic poses of the latter, ‘The time is 1939 and over for arguing that one *is* poetry and the other is not.’ As such, Grigson’s 1933 grandstanding attack against an otiose establishment, coupled with his ecumenical defense of everyday themes and poetic objectivity, though admittedly naive in terms of editorial sophistication, was nonetheless ultimately the move of a shrewd publisher. Indeed, Grigson’s vociferous, bellicose style, particularly in his famously brutal poetry reviews, courted rather than skirted literary controversy with other literary cliques, a tactic which along with his editorial idiosyncracies gave *New Verse* a distinct cultural tonality. No wonder his ambitious opening editorial statement even emphasized the affordable price of *New Verse*, sixpence, the equivalent of ‘A bus fare from Piccadilly to Golders Green.’

**References and Further Reading**

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