The aim of this introduction is to place the following essays into a polemical context. My basic argument is that an exclusive concern with politics is threatening to impoverish our understanding of poetry. It has led to an ignorance of tradition and a corresponding blankness in the face of poetry as art. And, if criticism is so desensitised that it cannot recognise or respond to a poem as a poem, then what possible credence can be given to its political pronouncements? It is only by reconsidering what is meant by tradition that we can revitalise our sense of poetry which will, in turn, make us demand more of our politics than that it confuse posture with action or achievement.

There are two recognisable strands to twentieth-century British poetry. For John Powell Ward they are the 'English line' and Modernism. The former runs from William Wordsworth to Philip Larkin and is characterised by 'verbal reserve and the pragmatic and laconic suspicion of the visionary or the extravagant'. Ward argues that the dominant mood of this tradition is melancholy. It yearns for a lost past which it identifies with the natural world. The modernist tradition, by contrast, savours words for their own sake and prefers classical and mythological subjects to pastoral ones. It is less interested in nature than in 'how humans civilise nature with buildings, works of art...ideas and forms of law and institutions'. Generally, where the 'English line' is diffident, pessimistic and reserved, the modernist one is robust, optimistic and outgoing.

Ward argues that the Movement represents the last of the 'English line'. Mainly written in the 1950s, Movement poetry was a reaction to the innovations and formalistic concerns of modernism and the visions, mangled syntax and runaway rhetoric of 1940s verse. The first anthology of Movement poetry was Robert Con-
quest’s *New Lines* (1956), and this was followed by A. Alvarez’s *The New Poetry* (1962). Its restricted subject matter, empirical character, disciplined construction and chaste diction represented a poetic timidity, inviting charges of philistinism and provincialism. It hardly seemed possible that such a myopic and exhausted poetry could adapt to the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. It therefore came as no surprise when Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in *Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) claimed that their choice of poets signalled an imaginative freedom and linguistic daring wholly absent from Movement verse. Morrison and Motion also argued that the poets in their collection were aware of how language was implicated in politics, history and locality, giving it a significance beyond the circumscribed ‘blokeishness’ of Movement poets.

Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley distance themselves even further from the nostalgia and conservatism of the Movement in their anthology, *The New Poetry*. Their title is a typical postmodernist tactic – a literal quotation from the past in order to re-evaluate and give it a new meaning in the present. Their new poetry, unlike that of the Movement, really is open, accessible and democratic. It casts off, the editors confidently announce, the negative inheritance of British poetry, ‘its ironies, understatements and dissipated energies’, what Morrison calls the Movement’s ‘failure of nerve’. Moreover, where Movement writers saw themselves as writing for a small, academic audience, the poets in *The New Poetry* reaffirm art’s significance as public utterance. If Hulse and his fellow editors are to be believed, Movement poetry is dead indeed.

Eric Mottram, however, would disagree. His argument is that, even now, in the mid 1990s, it is only Movement type poetry which is anthologised and reviewed. *Contemporary British Poetry* and *The New Poetry* do not so much abandon Movement poetics as develop them. Both, for example, are as wary of the romantic self as were Movement poets and, in their desire to restore value to the ‘debased currency’ of language, they betray the influence of F.R. Leavis, the Movement’s ‘most important authority’. Movement dominance, argues Mottram, has meant that other types of poetry, particularly that found in the small presses between 1960 and 1975, has not received the critical attention it deserves.

This body of poetry, continues Mottram, encouraged a wide readership by its emphasis on performance. It gave a voice to the