

A Poetry Boom
1990-2010

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A Poetry Boom *1990-2010*

Shocked Grains Wash Up As a Beach

Andrew Duncan

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She don't dance to disco any more
She don't dance to disco, hiphop or electro
She don't dance to disco any more

from 'She Don't Dance to Disco'
composed by Love/Love/Love/Dope
for The Alabama Three

The universe is a sub-infinite array of bad data.

— *anon.*

Is he in raptures with a cup of good Ale? Does he prefer his own works to any of the Ancients or Moderns? Doth he despise all other languages and learning? Doth he affect low company and greedily swallow the praises of tinkers and cobblers? Would he get out of bed to sing with the harp, as Gronwy used to do with me? Is he naturally inclined to buffoonery, dirty language, and indecent expressions?

—Lewis Morris, 1761

INTRODUCTION

SHOCKED GRAINS FROM A POETRY BOOM

There is an atmosphere in poetry sections in High Street bookshops. This is the poetry market. It offers a world of delicate and cultured people, low on aggression and high on conscience. The keyword is sensitivity, implying a nebula of fine structures which cannot thrive in an environment of coarse surfaces. The value is in the slight and easily damaged wisps of atmospheres, not the big and powerful feelings. The language is quiet enough for small and rare sounds to be heard. The inclination is towards personality and not towards analytical intelligence, which is more readily to be had in adjacent departments. It is towards the small scale and organic. The customers identify with the personalities of poets, relate to them as friends, rather than identifying with techniques and ideas. People who actually buy poetry approve of this atmosphere. It has the warmth and intimacy of a student house, the mixture of hope, naivety and deep interiority of a teenager's bedroom. No one would claim that the blurbs of books are fair and informative. No one would claim that the choice of books available in the shops is the best possible. But this does not matter so much. The blurbs identify what people want at the same time that they disguise the fact that they are not going to get very much of it. People come in, wander around, leave bearing the thing they want. Perhaps human beings are small scale and organic, in contrast to some of the phenomena that humans create. This art seems to favour the personal to the exclusion of anything else. If we miss those fragile and unresisting feelings, we miss the whole event. Sensitivity is what we have to write about. The *quality of care*.

I read a book about 'authenticity' in popular music which I found disturbing at many levels. It was *Faking It*, by Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor. Part of it was one of the two saying that seeing 'authenticity' in simple musical forms, poverty, being part of a 'folk community', in naivety, etc. and in the scratchy qualities of reprocessed 78s laboriously collected by ethnomusicologists, etc., was a fantasy and an indulgence and on a par with the appeal of any commodity. Then also you had one of the authors arguing for the purity of commercial pop. He cited 'Sugar Sugar' by The Archies, which was number 1 for six weeks in the UK in 1969. This was derided at the time—even other thirteen-year-olds, I was 13, would have derided you for liking it. It was a poster dog

for ‘bubblegum’. But when this guy discussed it I could remember it really clearly, not having heard it for 40 years. That riff on the marimba or whatever it was. ‘Pour your sugar on me’. It was shocking to find someone go into print defending ‘Sugar Sugar’ or anything to do with Don Kirshner. The fact that I could remember it proved it wasn’t forgettable—there was something really strong about it. Love as a sugar rush and a hit record as both smeared together. The point is, most of the poets in recent anthologies are amazingly dumb. It is like pre-Beatles pop music. They have been bypassed by all the innovations that came along in the ‘post repressive high’ that followed the Fifties. Their project for poetry is egocentric and conservative. They have no techniques more modern than custard powder. But it’s a mistake to approach them from the standpoint of someone who has read modern literature and climbed the peaks. No—it’s better if you approach them as naive art, as something almost senseless but potentially heady and indulgent. The best run-up is to go onto YouTube and listen closely to records by Tommy James and the Shondells, The Association (‘Windy’), The Cowsills (‘The Park, the Rain, and Other Things’), The Monkees, and Tommy Roe (‘Dizzy’). There is a ‘reduction’ involved, a vision of the poem succeeding because it is simple and can be tinted into complete harmony—fully resolved.

The figures we have tell that the number of new books of poetry published each year nearly doubled between 1976 and 1993 and then nearly doubled again by 2000, then staying at this level. In the years 1999-2001 roughly as many books of poetry were published as in the whole of the 1970s. This is a poetry boom. We seem to have a situation where there are 100,000 Eng Lit graduates and 10,000 write a book of poems and succeed in getting it published. This is the outcome of large-scale benign processes. You aren’t going to take to the streets and chant *Less choice. Less access. Now!* A knock-on is that I can’t survey the period; all I can do is make notes on the regions I’ve been to. We’re on the beach and the marks in the sand get wiped away every night. Maybe 12,000 people have published at least one book of poetry. (Maybe it’s only 10,000—oh, that’s so much easier. Am I an expert on all ten thousand? *What do you think?* “‘I love you all’ he lied and left the room.”) People like what poetry has to offer. It is more plausible to describe the things people like than to describe some other cultural system which would be more free of flaws.

Not all poems work. However much you dislike theory, the sound of an emotional-symbolic structure slipping, snapping its pegs, teetering, and collapsing into cultural rubble is all-pervasive: the sound of Now. We have to listen very closely to that sound. I have included a number of chapters on critique, the thing poets dislike most.

Some poets think that equity means that *whatever I say is true*. It seems to support the statement *whatever other people say about me is true*, but in fact the rule changes at that point. The idea of softening the boundary between the self and the world does not abolish the outside world. It may be that the gift of the poet is to internalise parts of the outside world, to soften the boundary between the self and the world. The critic is trying to bring the processes of the self outside, into the light where they can be objectively examined. That is the reverse process, pretty much. At present the statement ‘justice means Me getting exactly what I want’ seems to be socially acceptable. I want to reform this to say that ‘people who actually wrote and finished numerous poems of high quality and who didn’t get good reviews, circulation, etc. are examples of Injustice’. Prose has to be founded on equity.

SPECTRAL INVESTMENT

Todd Swift (of the *Eyewear* blog, <http://toddsswift.blogspot.co.uk/>) described me as [“I just read Andrew Duncan’s brilliant and provocative review of *Beyond The Lyric*, in the summer *Tears in the Fence*. Duncan is one of the best poetry critics in the UK—and one of the most radical. He is essential reading, especially because his work does not seek the texture of reassuring professional conformity that some reviews and criticism aspire to; nor is he a knee-jerk knock-about. His voice is concerned, other, and often proto-punk. His is the voice of a poetry Britain I also want to hear and know.”] ... [someone emailed me this]. At another moment Swift said I was wrong 80% of the time. What is going on here? The factors which make for agreement have been weakening over the past 30 years. If we imagine six connoisseurs of poetry, with the 20% overlap, they might produce 500% of the information needed. This could be a very fertile process. But it is worrying if you think conversation is about sharing states of mind. The main impulse in the

poetry scene is to contact other people and to listen to what they say. This was my goal at every point. But what about the 80% wrong? I can't capture 'the reaction that everyone finally reached' if that reaction does not exist. But I think I know what the new sound is. We have a lot of criticism which relies on close reading and excluding the ideas around the poem—but the precondition for understanding the poems better may be to understand the projection by the audience: the codes of shared subjectivity. This is a method which gets away from egocentricity. A little anyway—I still choose the texts. (I was not in Detroit in 1969 (and am not proto-punk) but I would admit that Peter Fuller is the cultural critic I feel closest to.)

I wanted a much simpler and more pleasure-based approach, and at the same time (2005) I moved away from London and to Nottingham. This kept me away from the internecine and overheated poetry scene. There just isn't much of a poetry scene here. This allowed me a much more selective approach. Since then I have been spending much of my limited free time studying Welsh and Gaelic. A residual nationalist thing, I suppose. Being involved in Gaeldom does tend to erode the distinction between 'folk' and 'literary' and make you more interested in the 'folk' thing. Just as being away from the hotbeds makes you forget what the avant-garde is for.