Centre and Periphery in modern British poetry
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**revised second editions from Shearsman
Centre and Periphery
in modern British Poetry

Andrew Duncan

Shearsman Books
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Dropping the h-sound in *have* is a sign of low prestige, dropping the glottal stop in *what* (to replace it with a historic t) is a sign of high prestige – although these sounds are more closely related to each other than to any others. Both are laryngeals: h is the ghost sister of \( \dot{\varepsilon} \). They are degree zero phonemes, set outside the structure of oppositions which generate the other phonemes in the English kit, and since they are not clusters of distinctive features, and cannot be decomposed, it is not surprising that for many speakers each one is not a phoneme. Few speakers are missing both of them. The Indo-European laryngeals are phantoms, conjured up by Kuryłowicz to explain, as the trace of a sound which vanished around 3000 BC, the resemblance between Greek *osteon* ‘bone’ and Russian *kost’* ‘bone’.

For some systematists, they might be described as two realisations of the same archiphoneme, because they cannot stand in lexical opposition to each other: h occurs only as a syllable starter, glottal stop only as a syllable terminal. Each bears a resemblance to a non-linguistic, merely muscular, act, of breathing out or of closing the windpipe to end the sounding of a consonant at the end of a speech group. Everyone south of York can socially be placed rather accurately on the basis of a plot of the distribution of the laryngeals in their speech. We could posit a law of complementary distribution stating that:

- where speaker X possesses the initial h-sound they do not possess the syllable-final glottal stop

which in fact is untrue. The disposition of charges illustrates a number of rules – the conservatism of school grammar, the conceptual innovation of the substandard, the failure of recording systems to catch something outside their code (and consequent ‘lack of history’ of the popular), the excessive status/prestige reading-coding of accidental distinctions, the more consistent pursuit by colonial populations of trends ‘governed’ within the parent territory – familiar to students of British society. The glottal stop is the summa of the inarticulate – quite literally, since it has no articulatory features.

The hope of poets of speaking with degree zero of class background, of becoming accessible to all parts of social knowledge by losing social attitudes, of reaching the whole market by transcending the oppositions on which it is structured, places them in a position analogous to laryngeals, vulnerable and outside the carefully ordered central space. In this outside,
the transcendent and the meaningless are adjacent, and interchange: as Roy Fisher and W.S. Graham were generally seen as meaningless in the 1960s, and are now accepted as transcendent; the work of J.H. Prynne is today regarded by some as meaningless, by others as sublime.

The different flavours of \( h \) and \( \dot{j} \) do not exist, and do exist because they are perceived, and are powerful, and are arbitrary at the level of the collective but unchangeable at the level of the individual. Vocal geometry is not social geometry: the reverse status (high and low) of these two sisters who married different men is merely social: the varying pricedness of various features of poetic speech is arbitrary, but within the force-field with which a society envelops its members, the structural oppositions which set the positional meaning of any feature are so ‘available’ that anyone will acquire them to the extent that they are not lacking in insight, or misanthropic, or very young. The composition of meaning out of stacks of polar oppositions is so complicated, in poetic taste, that it is elaborate and robust as well as arbitrary. Questions like ‘why is a broad vocabulary better than a narrow one’ or ‘why do you find intelligence attractive’ can hardly be set within the terms of a system which is founded upon them, amongst others, as laws. The distribution of poetic responses and utterances is predictable if we choose our level of precision correctly, just as the distribution of laryngeals, and of responses valuing them, is predictable. You can either experience the glottal stop as a sign of solidarity and equality, or as a sign of squalor and of the rules of good behaviour being breached, but the range of other responses is very limited and thinly populated. Each poem is composed of an array of stylistic gestures, and the value of these is familiar, public, and largely agreed. Taste, like the law, is based on precedents to which the new and ‘meaningless’ is linked by a system of classification. The attempt of poets to reach a vantage point above the system demands that they selectively delete the oppositions present in their speech, and of which the system is composed, guiding them towards discourse which is either the set common to all groups, minimal, de-articulated, empty of distinctive features, or a superset, containing more oppositions than any real idiolect or social place possesses, a maximum of lexicon, syntagmemes, and experiences. The theme of this book is partly to outline the former, or regionalist, school, and trace its differences from the latter, known as the small press experimental school.

The sociologist Elisabeth Bott demonstrated, in the 1950s, that different people in the same community asked to produce a map of class structure produced quite different maps (\[2\] pp.159-91). The class system is a product of people’s perceptions, organises their perception of each other, and yet is proved by these to be a dozen or so systems of intermittent
reality, competing for the site at which they could be real; and this is the state of social rules in general. Writing about poetry – about how a poet perceives and how others perceive those perceptions – is an act converging on a position which does not exist; one tries to occupy a site in social space which is not there, because it is either ‘above’ or ‘outside’ the real positions which make up the local universe.

Because of this manifoldness, selective attention is a skill central to poetry, or indeed to verbalising. Eric Homberger, in his 1977 history of modern British and American poetry, remarks: ‘Other schools, traditions, groups, movements, in an increasingly Balkanised context, have had to be ignored’. This is the geography we all move in, a wonderful excuse for selective treatment, making the reader’s choice difficult and apparently invalidating anything (since I obviously belong to one of these neo-Pictish hill tribes) I say. Criticism failed to take in or on the explosion of British poetry in the 1960s; this book is part of a project, not all to be written by me, whose directing idea was to describe all of these ‘other schools’.

It is hard to draw a satisfying border around the subject. A given design draws a perimeter around the book, leaving lots of strands which lead, in a tantalising way, outside that perimeter. Doubling the size of the book would capture more of these strands, but make us less tantalised but would make the perimeter longer and so at least double the number of strands which tantalizingly overflow it. There is no particular extent which is more satisfying than other possible extents. However, the author can reach a point of exhaustion and give up. I have not considered Irish poetry, nor poetry written in Welsh, nor more than one section of Scottish poetry. The selection of poets has striven to leave out ones discussed in my other book, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, and ones discussed, in a satisfactory manner, by other critics. It may be as well to emphasise chronological limits; the present is the domain of being, whereas the past is the domain of knowledge, and hence of extended writing. A large part of the book already existed in 1995, and has benefited from prolonged reflection. The need for reflection, too, means that the poetry in the foreground of this study was written, mostly, between 1940 and 1980.

The use of sociology, or rather of the set of up-down valuations and of other stored collective meanings within which a poem must be written and read, makes it impossible to write about Ireland – without adding a second volume. Selecting poets on the basis of their country builds the principle of nationalism into the foundations of the book. I think I have shot myself in the foot here, since this gives nationalistic English readers the perfect excuse not to read Scottish and Welsh writers, whereas one of my main intents is to make these writers more popular.
I was reading section 2 of Bobi Jones’ 1986 poem, *The Nightmare of Arthur* (*Hunllef Arthur*), it got to some battles where he was massacring the barbarians, and I pulled up short because these barbarians were Picts, and I immediately turned, not only against Arthur, but against Bobi Jones. Why? Because the Picts lived in Scotland and therefore were my blood relations. When one set of reading rules suddenly transmutes into another, you get the chance to compare the two; briefly making transient things visible and conscious. One of my internalised rules states that ‘it has a higher prestige if you forgive the hereditary enemy and enjoy culture produced by English, French, or Catholic people’; it comes up on screen as I am breaking it. Momentarily, I admire myself for being detached. Then Jones goes on to say that the Caledonian Forest should be renamed from Coed Celyddon to Coed Coluddion, (bowels wood), fbecause of all the Picts being disembowelled by Arthur’s heroes; and how the weapons of Kay’s troops flash among the branches like red squirrels, and indeed they are stuffing every hole in the ground with corpses against the winter. Then I say, ‘this is obnoxious and ignoble and I don’t want to read a poem where the Picts lose’. What this book is about (mine not Bobi’s) is how, although the modern focus of identification and side-taking in poetry is the individual who writes it, some poets have widened this bound by hoisting a community into the role of primary actor. Jones thinks that he can glorify Arthur as a Christian ruler, killing to promote his religion, when its rules say that killing is wrong; he also thinks that he can write a 300-page poem not about the writer’s personality and still have the reader identify with the flow of events. But what we see is the command to identify exposed, like pipes waiting to be stacked on the pavement, with nothing running through them. The kit of shapes with which we, reading, construct identifications, zones of observation, contests, and rules for establishing the winner, mirrors sets of patterned oppositions and qualities used in daily life which, like the use-rules of laryngeals, mediate subjectivity but are collective, predictable, follow rules, and are governed by the intelligence. The rules of British society are not secret, but lack a notation.

Being able to stand back and observe the staging of the contest is perhaps the greatest luxury a reader is offered today; being so committed to one side that there is no possibility of joining the other switches off the intelligence because its function is complete; a writer can only be interesting by being undecided and highly alert. You can sell a romance about courtship, but not about marriage or about people who dislike the opposite sex. Detachment is the power-seeking quality of the professional classes who, as in Aristotle’s magisterial four-word summary of the skill of a rhetorician, ‘to be able to argue both sides’, work for the highest bidder.
and so permit him the choice of what is desirable. Middle class children are punished by their parents for not being detached, and so falling from the path which leads to professional status. The employer gets value for money. If intelligence has values, it ceases to be a commodity, and so is unsaleable. If I wrote in a partisan way, the book would not be published; this is a non-prestige mode – a glottal stop. Prose – poetry too – which adopts prestige speech modes too assiduously gives off a certain smell. Emotional attachment can be done by everybody, it is not the prerogative of the upper middle classes, and this is why we say that detached observation of the play of forms is the highest pleasure.

Addition 2016

With this new edition, the first in paperback, I have the opportunity, thanks to the generosity of the publisher, to reconsider the original text as published in 2004. (Script originally submitted 1996.) I have left it intact but I have added some new sections – and in fact there is now some material on poetry in Welsh. In the past ten years I have acquired a lot more Welsh and Gaelic, but acquiring enough knowledge to generalise about the field, as opposed to reading individual texts, has proved beyond my resources.

I believe that two concepts deployed in the text may be unfamiliar to readers. *Sprachkrise* (speech crisis) is where the decision which language to write in becomes so fraught that no state of certainty is possible. The subtext is that this crisis promotes the resort to avant-garde language in a fertile way. The oscillation of the avant-garde style may reflect the crisis as a form of energy and self-knowledge.

The Influencing Machine is a device described by Natalija A, a patient of the psychoanalyst Viktor Tausk. It looks like a human body and sends out rays of influence which control the thoughts and actions of the influenced person. It expresses the world view of someone who does not believe they have any agency. This would include professional victim groups. There is a view whereby the cultural centre (of Britain or the world) is a battery of influencing machines all looking like people. History is their fault.
Part 1

The Spatial Distribution of Cultural Assets
Crisis and Disaffection

The industrial crisis of the early 1980s was especially severe and rapid in its onset; its political consequences were unusually deep because the central government was not saying that it was a disaster which they would do all in their power to make better, they were saying that any kind of intervention in favour of weak firms or large payrolls was immoral and corrupting, and that what hurt most was most virtuous. This broke the faith of entire sectors of society in government. The media correctly made the electorate aware that the Conservatives were losing elections in the North, Wales, and Scotland, while winning in the South; putting strain on the notion of the United Kingdom, and on countrywide poetic links, while inducing greater centralisation as Westminster punished the disloyal periphery.

The graph of unemployment had been going up steadily since about 1967; the decline of Britain as a trading nation began in the 19th century; the number of people in employment now is not smaller than what it was in the early 1960s; the rustbelt of declining heavy-industrial regions stretches right across Europe to North Kazakhstan. None of these facts has the political importance of the contempt and hatred signalled by the Conservative Party for the working class outside the south-east, which made millions afraid of the government just as they became wholly dependent on it. The disintegration of the post-war social democratic consensus – however few of the victims are optimistic enough to have become ‘radicalised’, however many voters are content with the government and scared of change – discredited its theologians and front-men, including the managers of the poetry world. Poetry is an art practiced largely by those employed in education, which makes them state employees; a general revulsion against the clerks in the dole office is likely to be generalised to teachers. Poets frequently call on a collective, and if the notion of the collective has been identified with a sickness, with betrayal, with furious and uncalmable resentment, poetry mutates, imploding into domesticity or expanding into a revolutionary stance. The consensual identifying of the inhabitants of the south-east with evil, theft, and lies wrote off London literature and made possible a new understanding of 20th-century poetry.

Class and regional tensions have reduced to an improbable degree since I wrote this book; the rise of the new economy in regions beyond the Trent-Severn-Exe line has closed an entire period of politics and sensibility. Flushed with victory, we would be unwise to ignore the connection between the collapse of Britain’s historic export industries, an export economy dominated by arms sales, the need for American friendship to
go on doing this, and a strangely Republican foreign policy line being followed by Labour. The tensions in Labour policy formation between the wishes of the regions, and the louder voices of the City of London (and of Washington, DC and the World Trade Organisation) have been soothed by a kind of political genius, but have clearly not disappeared into the museum.

The Mysterious Devastation of the Atlantic

It is the decline of the Atlantic trade which explains much of the regional economics of modern Britain. Regional poverty, the modern version of the East-West divide, explains both why there is so much resentment of the central region (Midlands and South-East), and why there are so many people looking for a more radical solution to the problems of Atlantic Britain. Sinn Fein, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party (SNP), Militant Tendency, Communists: in the north west there is a striking concentration of voters who want to change, not just current decisions, but the rules of the political system. There is a common decline of the Atlantic ports: Glasgow, Liverpool, Belfast, Swansea, Cardiff, many others besides, following the decline of the Atlantic trade; since this involved two ends (despatcher and receiver, who is also purchaser), the Celtic nature of the Western ports and their regions is only coincidental to their decline; they are Celtic because the Western half of the island, and archipelago, are Celtic, but the shift of trade is international.

However parlous the plight of the old industrial regions, central government has historically pumped resources from the taxpayer to these regions – the widespread belief that the prosperity of the South-east and Midlands core is due to money being sucked away from the North and West is harder to prove and is, I think, paranoid. The recession afflicted areas on the east side of the country (Tyneside) and in the centre, as well as others in the Midlands and South East: boroughs like Hackney and Tower Hamlets in London, for example. The geographers Kirby and Robinson point out that ‘Greater London and surrounding towns constitute the country’s most important manufacturing area: some 2.5 million workers are employed…’, but clearly, pressures on industry, and the exorbitant local cost of land and property, have made life difficult and insecure for the industrial workers of the South-East.

To explain the 18th- and 19th-century boom of the Atlantic ports, we have to recall the economic and political conditions which allowed, for a limited historical period, world trade to be dominated by Britain. The
overseas markets, to which British goods were shipped from the Atlantic ports, included the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, Latin America, South Africa, India, China. Isn’t it true that they bought because they had no native industries yet; or because their financial sector was run by British banks; or because they were colonies outright? Times change. The exports to these territories declined at a very uneven rate, and the composition of exports kept changing, while the volume at times even increased. There were no ‘events’ which one could dramatise or, for example, write a poem about: all the same, the curve is mostly one way, and no-one expects Canada, Australia, and the United States to become again farming communities, eager to buy British manufactured goods. American railways were once built of British steel… meanwhile, the growth of markets in Europe was a solace at national level, but demanded port facilities in the east of the country: while manufacture could more conveniently take place close to those outward shores and to the European continent. The growth of the North Sea and Channel trade did not cause the decline of the Atlantic – instead, the latter is a secular and international curve. A decline in the new industries and new ports would do nothing to alleviate the recession in the West; on the contrary, a decline in tax revenues would bring mechanical pressure to bear on Welfare expenditures and threaten the worst off. Transfer payments from the prosperous classes, and regions, of Britain, to the less prosperous, are no longer high in comparison with other developed countries, but the net flow has been very appreciable.

The main inheritor of British markets has been the U.S.A., as the world’s leading exporter of manufactures: I suppose I used to get angry about this, as a young man. But the logic of criminalising someone who does what you do, export, is that you criminalise yourself. You can’t ask someone who’s undergoing unemployment, the worthlessness of their skills, destitution, despair, to be philosophical; but art has to depict situations from all angles of vision in order to reach any kind of truth.

The Atlantic was, from say 1700 up to 1950, a river on whose banks stood the Empire: when we look at the big empty docks on the West coast, the real meaning of what we see is decolonisation. Yet Britain could export to Latin America, Africa, and even the U.S.A., if it produced the right goods. The source of economic potency is in design and manufacture, not in naval power. Nobody who lets the Japanese in would exclude us – if we produced the right goods at the right price. As for the future, no-one really expects British industry to generate new jobs, it can thrive only by such advances in overall productivity that net employment can scarcely increase.

The regionalist thesis is that regional poverty is there because people in the South-east have preferential access to the government and makers
of financial policy and simply take the money away from the outlying regions. But the thesis can only apply in the domain left untouched by other theses about regional inequality, for example, that it is caused by climate and geology, so that it is the fertility of the soil, dictated by the chemistry of the rocks which weathered down to make it, which decides the wealth and population density of a province; or that it is natural communications and access to trade routes which allow business to thrive in one area, making another less attractive. Another factor, important in the distant past, was simply openness to immigration, more advanced populations swarmed in to accessible and attractive areas (principally in the South-East) and introduced more productive techniques, which made the affected provinces much richer.

The question of failures by the City, the owners of capital, and by the Government, as the origins of the problems of regional industries, and so of entire regions, requires us to go outside the world of appearances, i.e. prices and profitability directing capital, to the invisible, system-founding, contests of which prices are the results. Either price – both the expression and the basis of power relations – is inherent in a commodity, such as labour; or its setting is a cultural act. Scepticism about the ‘black and white’ of figures which show that industry is unprofitable is culturally expressed as the critique of the means of literature, the unnatural history of what seems natural. The centre is only invoked because the regions, and their business leaders, were unable to win their own struggles; but this incites the retort that commerce, finance, and government collaborated to reduce the share of sales revenues which reached primary producers, and competed to deprive the latter of the voice in policy which would have allowed them a remedy. The head offices of firms are mostly in London; interestingly, it has been argued that this strengthened industry:

Thus, the emergence of the large corporation in British industry did promote the growth of a more coherent, politically aware, industrial interest which had more influence than in the past and was closer to centres of power in London, where the head offices of these major companies were based.


This allowed firms, from about 1890, to draw more capital from the financial markets, rather than relying on personal savings and retained profits, in time-hallowed fashion.
State intervention to relieve regional imbalances and help depressed areas began in 1928. Without it, regional poverty would presumably have been much worse than it is today. A glance at the map of depressed areas (first called Special Areas, then Development areas, then Assisted Areas) will show that government assistance has been concentrated in the Celtic areas. Since 1928, there have been large flows of tax money into the regions where the greatest hostility to the State and to centralised power prevails. Political divisions about small government or big also have a regional basis; in the 1980s, politologists voiced fears that the Conservative and Labour Parties might be migrating towards a regional basis, rather than an ideological, moral, or policy one. The balance between national and local government has been under attack, and has been changed by reforms whose results have been extensive and controversial.

British radicalism, in poetry as in politics, has drawn much of its personnel and ideas from the Highlands, or adjacent regions, and from Ireland. In those Atlantic provinces, the ideas of capitalism, of rule from Westminster, of loyalty to a shared British enterprise which was basically fair and successful, were rejected by entire communities. If everyone had a job who wanted one, the idea of rejection wouldn’t be so emotive today. When someone speaks of the Centre, we also have to understand by that word, sometimes, the central body of opinions – about the sanctity of property, the undesirability of state intervention, the benevolence of the corporation, the goodness of the great, the desirability of things as they are now – which upholds the social order. Even if only a minority seriously oppose these, outside the storms of youth and the rare accesses of rage, that minority has included a remarkable number of poets. If you maintain these opinions, you presumably do accept that they will bring disasters, as they have in the past, and as they are doing now. Property is a collective verbal fiction, from which individuals with the power of speech always have the possibility of withdrawing their consent. The linguistic field of the poetry we are describing contains the different effects of political opposition, phonetic diversity, and cognitive economic bases, as material traces in its verbal fabric. Their distribution map reflects diversity from the behavioural norms of the metropolitan regions, where the population of the island is thickly concentrated. More elusive is the reaction to stylistic devices which are excluded, or misused, because they are associated with loyalty to the central authorities, as innovations reach outlying regions in the wrapping of imports from the centre. The political failure of minority parties leaves their adherents at a certain distance away from reality, and puts stress on language; as negation in the symbolic domain has become the residual act of righteousness, poetry is drawn into gestures of defiance.
and pride. Part of the appeal of avant-garde forms may be the wish not to give countenance to the chains of legitimation and webs of validation of the prevailing social system. For the reader, what is not being said may add up to zero.

The metropolitan and social-democratic poetry system, represented by magazines such as the *London Magazine*, *Encounter*, and *Poetry Review*, by Radio Three and the British Council, was in a poor position when attacked, because of its lack of gifted poets and its exclusion of any serious political poetry. More or less in coordination with the rise of the New Right, it was winning a bitter battle against the ultra-politicised and formally challenging poets of the British Poetry Revival, erased from the public scene by a new alliance of populism and conservatism, closely resembling the Conservative alliance of the tabloids and the wealthy. Anti-Thatcherism meant, in poetic terms, vociferous rage against Morrison and Motion’s *Contemporary British Poetry*. It was a natural metaphor, since almost anyone who could read could see that this anthology was an attempt, à la Thatcher, to redefine everything radical over the previous twenty years as lunacy, subversion, and godless communism. This mapping, whereby traditional: radical in poetry translated right/left in politics, was carried out by most readers, but was not literally true, and presents difficulties for the analyst. The conservative victory meant, like so many other counter-revolutions, the decay of the system through its failure to co-opt the most gifted of its ‘internal enemies’; its victory was too sweeping, and therefore all innovative poetry was consigned to the unreviewed and undistributed small press world, to thrive in calm hostility. In poetry, the avant-garde was locked out *en masse*, rather than being taken in and fed in a kind of zoo.

A wide range of anti-Thatcherite critics have mistakenly equated the mainstream, as defined by this anthology (and sustained by dozens of other editors, of course), with the urban south-east and the ‘cultural iron triangle’ of London-Oxford-Cambridge. This immediately, by the logic of oppositions, defined anything from Newcastle, Cardiff, or Glasgow as radical, even when textual examination could show it to be conservative and worn out. It also effaced most of the formally radical poets, the stars of the Poetry Revival as defined by Eric Mottram, because they lived within the ‘cultural triangle’. This disastrous reduction of artistic relations to geographical ones paralleled a wishful ignorance of the fact that London had the country’s largest concentrations of Labour voters and of the unemployed, and the most radical Labour groups in the country. Part of our effort now must be to rewrite the modern history of poetry in poetic terms.
It is time to record some concrete details. A partial mapping of contemporary poets follows, to set out what my generalisations are founded on.

**Metropolitan Mainstream**

James Fenton, Tony Harrison, Andrew Motion, Hugo Williams

**Formally radical poetry created away from the south-east**


– within the regional group we also find poets who are traditionalist and, sometimes, sub-literary:

George Mackay Brown, Emyr Humphreys, Bobi Jones, T.S. Law, Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith, R.S. Thomas, Derick Thomson.

**Radical or counter-cultural poets from within the south-eastern region:**


The above classification is meant to be easily memorable, and so has not been subdivided. No claim is made that these distinctions apply to all the significant poets on the scene, or that the radical/traditional opposition is more than a schematic reading of a complex landscape. The number of poets listed comes from distaste at the selectivity and incompleteness which too many critics have shown in presenting a ‘map’ of the poetic scene.
Giving Away Power; The Question of Guilt

The linkage between {white educated articulate man as poet} and {white educated articulate man as civil servant or manager} is bizarre, thoroughly unacceptable to all the poets, and accepted by the harmonic logic of analogy shared by almost everyone else. Illiterates have low status, low income, and restricted economic possibilities; higher literacy correlates with wealth and status, and to miss this you would really have to be hard of hearing. The contemporary poet is grimly trying to become nativised, to merge with a community. He says, I'm one of you; and the reader replies, You're one of me? The project is not succeeding. The secret wish is to become the Other, to shed at the same time guilt and moral restraint, to go bush: me native, you anthropologist.

Guilt at speaking about how society works comes from epistemological challenges posed by the colonies struggling for liberation, by the working classes, by women, by the young, by ethnic minorities within the metropolis, by the 'peripheral' nationalities of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The strain on public utterance comes from its linkage to governmental action, itself under pressure because it was expanding so fast in the post-war decades; the more people expected of the government, the more they would fight to control its policy.

The flight to the margins comes from a durable and unbearable condition of anxiety about being in charge. It is more frightening than the earlier radical ambition of seizing power and solving the functional problems. The possibility of fundamental change was a quality of the system, and profound pessimism about the system includes acceptance of its unreformability.

Guilt and grievance management are important parts of poetics. The sensation of guilt pervades the cultural atmosphere. In the perception of the collective, it is attributed to those who are or were in charge, and therefore to writers as soon as they claim either to know what the rules are, or how people should behave. Writing a philosophical poem makes you more analogous to the mighty, therefore more guilty, than if you write a rock song. Intellectual poetry is beset by a structural analogy of ultra-literacy: as it pursues literacy along its own axis, as it sheds sympathetic circularity and the egocentricity of the here and now, it resembles the discourse of the most powerful and authoritative; and is structurally obliged to be politically critical, to break down the status system and favour the unsung and excluded; becoming ghosts within their own poems; the gesture is like postgraduate students of the elite faculties of philosophy handing out pamphlets at the gates of the Renault works. The poem finds its place on
a spectrum which goes from flaccid and indifferent, but full of solidarity and reassurance, to being edgy, intellectually demanding, original in its way of seeing the world, but also tallying with the discourse of the upper middle class and of formal situations. The ellipsis is a figure which can either signal solidarity in low status or socially-exclusive expectations of shared knowledge and astuteness; it changes flavour from poem to poem, or even from hour to hour, being merely a telltale where the charges of malevolence or trust generated by the situation as a whole find an outlet.

Writing poetry which is youthful, empty-headed, and drained of content may be an attempt to avoid the guilt gathering in the air. Another tactic is to attribute guilt to a group which is intellectually and politically distinct from yourself, with advocacy of the wronged group. Another is to make a gesture of giving away power, which assumes or pretends that you had administrative control of it in the first place: the poem as a ritual on the lawns of Government House where the colonial Governor, resplendent in plumes and sword, gives away control of the poem and the claim to be able to think.

One of the catchphrases of the day is radical subversion; claimed for almost everyone. Yet the political system I grew up with has proved of remarkable stability, or indifference; property prices have almost ceaselessly gone up, the middle class expands apparently without limits, the power of liquid capital is much greater and much less challenged today than twenty-five years ago. This subversion which leaves the system it attacks untouched is none. Whatever phrase we use of it would have ineffectual as its qualifying word. We might venture on: the hypocritical denial of an inferior status. Or: a rigged verbal contest which is roundly lost by the rigger. It is not even clear that modern poetry has managed to subvert its enfieffed and stultified predecessor; the poets of the 1950s seem to have succumbed to mortality rather than any daring revolt of the critics. However, where so many people claim to be doing something, that something draws our attention: radical subversion of authority is the final goal of modern poetry, a consummation we would recognise, not from ever having experienced it, but because so many thousands of experiences have supplied fakes, spoofs, and imitations of it, degrading and revealing the goal all at once.

The more of the world the poet pulls into the text, the more likely it becomes that a reversal of power will take place and the more organised voices from the world will prove the poet weaker and take over, repeating what was already said. As H.P. Lovecraft says, *Call not that up which ye cannot put down*. Wherever the contested point of this struggle is, becomes the area of maximum attention, the unsteady and even shattering pivot of the poem.
Recent British poetry shows a split between raising and belonging poets, whose work is immersed in a community, and claims to represent it, and personal poets who have developed an individual style and are, variously, expressive of personal feelings, socially critical and radical, or intellectual. The former trend may exist more in the propaganda of its publishers and promoters than on the page, but could be identified in anthologies such as *The Urgency of Identity*, *Sixty Women Poets*, *Ladder to the Next Floor*, and *Poetry with an Edge*. It can be said to represent that portion of the New Left which abandoned, or never held, advanced theoretical positions and, concomitantly, entered the state service at the local level and helped to sustain society, rather than remaining critical and exilic. These two stances, made solid only by an act of intellectual fiction, and occupying parts of a sociocultural space which contains many others, are diametric opposites (each one slights the assets which the other holds), contend for the space which is not filled by official or by amateur poetry; the shape of their extension into the stylistic, historic, and sociological planes, is the subject of the present work.

**Communitarian Politics**

From the point of view of many theorists, Labour is a capitalist party and the Conservatives a socialist one. They make much of the non-partisan nature of major policies of British central government. The Conservatives, during the 1950s, did little to reverse the revolutionary shifts made by Labour in the 1945-51 ministry, and Labour, elected to power in May 1997, have not wished to reverse the radical changes made by the Conservatives to trade union law, or to re-nationalise privatised industries. Frustrations with this common approach have been expressed through minority parties or through declining to vote; a decline in the popularity of both major parties at once, named de-alignment by the politologist Ivor Crewe, comes and goes, but was at centre stage in the 1970s, when all governments were discredited by a price revolution. A system allows the major parties to scoop up all the spoils, and they stand opposed to forces, inchoate, marginal, or frustrated, which reject that system. Parties which believe in the small scale would include the Liberals, the Social Democrats, the successor Liberal Democrat Party, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish Nationalists. The typical action of government, faced with a problem, is to appoint an administrative body to deal with it, working in an office, paid for by taxation, accountable
to a central ministry, staffed by professionally qualified workers, who increasingly are also graduates. The thesis of community politics is that the problem would be better solved by initiatives within the community, where the citizen supplies effort (or gifts of resources) rather than taxes, where the workers have no difficulty of communication with the people being helped, and where they are accountable to the people all around them. The community develops pride and self-confidence, and the weaker members of society acquire skills and cohesion to solve their own problems, rather than becoming dependent.

Catchphrases such as *grass roots*, *the community*, and *small is beautiful* bring to everyone's mind a set of arguments against state intervention and against firms employing more than half a dozen people. Small-scale gestures in poetry may be an expression of a political philosophy, as vehicles for a burden, in the sense of an integrated set of political theses and allegories. The growth of local government has meant an increase in the ranks of the middle class, tilting also the numerical balance of that class away from commerce and towards the state service; it directs higher education by absorbing so many of its products; it is caught up with the increase in specialisation, in educational levels, and in the numbers of professionals, which has been going on for at least 150 years; it goes along with great increases in the functions of government, and in taxation. If someone uses the catch-phrase *bureaucracy*, this in practice means that they think government should do less, or at least spend less. No-one boasts of the increase in government employees; it is in fact a non-partisan truth that 'there should be fewer of them', and both Labour and Conservatives have laid claim to being communitarian parties on many occasions; the gap between communitarian rhetoric and professional-administrative practice is subtle and can be ejected onto non-voluntary factors, such as *force majeure*.

The split between Labour and Conservative is evasive also in this area; so far as the Conservatives are a pro-capitalist party, their model also has the town being filled with office blocks filled with graduate, white collar professionals, following a rational-administrative set of rules, and working for a headquarters far away. These buildings belong to corporations, and they fulfil people's needs in exchange for cash. The household still is held incapable of fulfilling people's real needs, this time on the basis of local advantages of production rather than of socialism. However, in ceremonial speech the party claims to be on the side of small businesses.

There is a Green communitarianism, not compulsory for environmentalists. A belief in self-sufficiency asks to reduce trade; but trade is the basis of city life, and of large societies; smaller social units would not
want to receive government from a higher unit, and in fact the reward of having power over your own life restored would compensate for the impoverishment caused by dismantling the world specialisation of labour and production. The deep attachment to the land which is the motive for looking after it properly is easier for ‘local people’, whose psychological radius is narrow but intense. It is an effective point that corporate managers and owners, government ministers and civil servants, ignore the local effects of their decisions only because they are physically far removed from the site (of an aluminium smelter, power station, etc.) which they have power over. Although Green thinking certainly includes world treaties adhered to by governments (over greenhouse gas emissions, CFC emissions, whale hunting, etc.), exponents who do not want a strong local political power to emerge at the expense of big corporations and central government are very rare. One version of self-reliance would abolish food imports: no more hard wheat from the Canadian prairies, back to rye and barley bread from local grains used to cloudy skies. The calories spent on transport and storage are unnecessary to the core task of supplying food calories to a human mouth. The dislike of the wide radius is put on stage in the protest over the building of motorways; the thoroughfares are a public good, benefiting their future users, but the Greens think consensually, that people ought to stay where they are, that long-distance trade is a bad thing, and that businesses which want to grow ought to be ashamed of themselves.

There is a feminist version of communitarianism, which starts from the position that men will behave badly so far as in their power, and that reductions of their power will reduce the scope and reach of their badness. High office, capital wealth, modern weapons, high technology, are seen as instruments of male domination; they incite competition, make the means by which struggles for domination are carried out terribly destructive, and fund the domination of women, largely deprived of these instruments. Large organisations are conducive to male power, as opposed to matricentric ones (such as a primary school might be). Feminism is happier with the design of a thousand leaders of small communities, if only to disperse and de-concentrate the tumescent power now held by heads of state. The distaste of feminism, from its origins around 1970, for leaders, makes it quite dissimilar to political parties, trade unions, and so on; its approach to changing society problematises the behaviour complex of party, side-taking, ideological position, polarisation, antagonism, and winning. It also differs from other communitarian movements by its acceptance of Britain’s largely urban nature, and its lack of reliance on place.

A third devolutionary current is the small nations model, which wants to dissolve the British state but is quite happy for Scottish and Welsh states