Fulfilling the Silent Rules

inside and outside in modern British poetry

1960–1997
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Andrew Duncan

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SAMPLER
Introduction: Self-bracing Surfaces

This is part of a series of seven volumes on modern British poetry (one on the Internet at www.pinko.org), which are designed not to overlap. The British Council's excellent bibliography of *Poetry in Britain and Ireland since 1970* contains 700 names of British poets (as I laboriously counted, twice). There is a need for a book which explores the range of good poetry and gives a glimpse of the whole cultural field. The present volume is closest to an overview of the period. To help with shopping, you need to get a grasp of affinities, to tell you which poets are similar to the one you've just enjoyed; and a grasp of blind spots, so that when you reach the end of a vein you grasp where your guide is incomplete, and so where you might search next. The notion of the present volume is to cover the whole range of poetry being written within a short space, making the differences visible and so pointing to possible reasons why a hundred poets differ from each other. We can imagine – without being able to see – the process of differentiation, the stages through which such complex patterns were built up.

The year 1960 was chosen by Eric Mottram as the start of the British Poetry Revival (Wolfgang Görtschacher saw 1959 as a turning-point); the significance of 1997 is that I got a job in that year and had to wind down the research project. Evidently all kinds of poetry has happened since 1997, but I am content with the detachment which the passage of time brings. The purpose of the book is less to calm the present than to calm the past. The evaluation of British poetry of our time has been largely defeated by the material – if not by the external alliances of the critics. The process of winning understanding is essentially collective and it is the work of many minds which makes the poetry in question emerge in its true relations. By my reckoning, some 300 significant books of poetry were published in the period (listed at http://angelexhaust.blogspot.com/2011/07/poetry-shopping-list-2010.html). It is possible to have separate and accurate knowledge of each one. A dim infinity gives way to a place scattered with proper objects. The separation between poets is clear but coherence is less clear. I am wondering whether there is a quality of the age. We can link any given number of dots into a shape, but is it the shape of something?

Can we write prose about poetry? How do we get from the intense but local strips of personal experience to a glimpse of the whole cultural field? The aim of this book is to try and reach that shared picture,
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through absorbing hundreds of individual books. It is all blocked by my own personality, if that’s the right verb. You might well ask why it differs so much from some other views of the period, or ask me to write about the boring central poets to explain why my view of them differs from that of the institutions. I have avoided this, mostly because all the important positions are implicit and not transparent enough for a proper debate to take place. If people don’t believe prose about poetry, it is because of the factor of rage and retaliation, corroding shared space. This is a book full of calm objects. This is the part of the trial where evidence is presented. I believe this will move the whole process forward, towards a conclusion which I am unable to foresee.

Any sober account of the events of the period must read like an indictment of a bad subjectivity. With poetry, if you don’t get ‘with’ the text, it doesn’t recite itself to you. The reader can expel the poem from the experience by imposing an expectation pattern which the poem simply fails to match. The record of critics doing this to modern poetry is not exactly short. In fact, it seems that there is a lag of about thirty years in the reception of modern styles. I don’t want to prejudge the merits of modern poets, but understanding their work is a necessary step before making any judgments. Explaining how modern poems work seems to leave little time for explaining why the poets have lax moral standards and have, basically, got their poems wrong.

Consciousness itself is self-referential. It creates the surface it walks on. Making these miraculous paths stable enough to walk upon depends partly on excluding most of the ambiguity from view. Social reinforcement makes this easier. Culture has to do with complicated acts which you carry out without putting a step wrong. It runs over an even more fragile and more perfect surface. This dreamlike confidence has a lot to do with being socially accepted and relaxed. This is easier with small homogeneous groups where everyone knows each other. We should ask whether the extra-verbal knowledge is stored in a two-person boat which holds up the reader and the poet, or alternatively in small-scale social networks. I am not trying to refute other people’s artistic experience – and I also don’t think they can invalidate mine. The attempts to do so bring us to a central experience in poetry – the area of feeling high, of demolishing someone’s high, of grey, dull, and blank states of mind, of rage and negation of other people’s words.

To be radically subjective is likely to notch up non-reproducible results, and runs the risk of recording information, indefinitely extens-
ible, of no relevance to the reader. In the past ten years or so I have tried a number of non-qualitative ways of analysing the data. Little trace of these appears in the text, because most of them lead to so little. Without qualitative appreciation, poetry is almost meaningless. To be stubbornly objective runs, again, the risk of recording information, indefinitely extensible, of no relevance. I have tried an analysis which is qualitative and objective at the same time, in the hope of revealing the shape of the cultural field, something vast enough to contain a thousand poets or even more.

The great feature of the period is the large number of excellent poets. This is a permanent threat to the narcissism of the individual poet. I admit that I dislike the damaging of the artistic space in order to assert resentment and claims to attention. This does down the audience, including me, even if it enables the fractions to gouge more resources out of the central institutions. In the end, it’s the integrity of that artistic space which allows aesthetic pleasure. Dissent, conflict, interruption, shutting down, prevent the messages from getting through. Of course the disaffected are right to think that the whole process is subjective. This realisation is useless in itself. Could we see the attempt to set up rules of aesthetics (we exclude all poets who do not write in a realist style, all poets who do not innovate, etc.), as responses by the poets to their feelings of panic? For the reader, the abundance of good poets represents wealth and fulfilment. Why should we identify with this noise of panic and civil litigation? I think the excessive feature of the modern scene is the attempt to draw the poem wholly into the ownership of the poet. The poet is not a child we have to console. We should remember that beauty exists in the world before a poem opens a window on it, and that the capacity to feel beauty, along with a context set aside and protected by custom to enjoy it in, existed before any particular poet seized temporary control of them.

A survey implies that I look at all points in the landscape and then omit most of them in the write-up. Overviewing is pretty close to overlooking. Anybody will tell you that the work a historian has to do is mainly reading the bad books. By doing this, I dug up all kinds of unjustly forgotten literary works. But it wore me down. I can’t claim to be familiar with all 7,000 names. This is where the concept of maladministration arrives on the scene. You can’t decide which books not to read on an objective basis. I’m not sure what would constitute due process in reading a book. The idea of reading was for me to have a
good time, not to allow the poet to exercise quasi-property rights over the experience. A number of significant poets don’t feature in this book.
The Rules of the Game
SAMPLER
Groups and Boundaries:
The Poetic Field Around 1995

The poet John Hartley Williams asked, in a baffled letter, “Why is there virtually no overlap between three recent anthologies of modern British poetry?” The increased complexity of the scene does seem to have brought about mutual incomprehension, while invalidating the single-point perspective, which – one cannot emphasize this too strongly – gave rise to the puzzling complexity by irritating poets into passionate revolt. Perhaps we can get some glimpse of the overall shape of the cultural field by looking at a number of anthologies; important socialising sites where both poets and readers undergo violent waves of assimilation and dissimulation.

I wondered about the total count of poets active in the period I write about, viz. 1960 to 1997. One way of getting at this is to use sample points which are, or possibly are, counts of the complete numbers of books published in a particular year. Four I found are: 1960: 131; 1976-7: 906; 1994: 1,737; 1997: 2,311. If we make some major assumptions and take the value for each year in between as the average of those data points, we can build a model for the total number of books in the period. This model yields a figure of 40,139 books for the period. A more cautious model would give 28,000 books. If we assume an average of four books per poet (ASSUMPTION), in a 40-year span, this gives us 7,000 poets.

From the imaginary point of a book that covers all the seven thousand, we look down and find every less complete account to be incomplete. If I offer 140 poets, or even a stack of anthologies that give moments of 400 poets, that is amazingly selective. We do well to ask how the set was cut down to allow this reduction. We would find alliances, barriers, gatekeepers, and ideologies, everywhere.

The assumptions in the model above are pretty huge. Anyone is welcome to provide better figures at any time. As you can imagine, collecting and cleaning up the data is pretty tedious. Maybe ‘roughly 7,000’ means ‘more than 4,000 and less than 16,000’. If you swallow the big figure, this also explains why different critics seem to be living in different worlds: we each take a swathe of this huge dark territory and the swathes scarcely overlap. If you see an anthology claiming coverage of the period with 80 poets, it is worth asking if the 80 victors are (a) the best (b)
the most conformist (c) the best connected to people the editor wants to be owed favours by (d) the ones who went to the best universities (e) the most marketable (f) a random morass. I have written, here and elsewhere, about poets whose work I like. That is egocentric, I suppose. I heard a radio programme where a musician (the singer with Mercury Rev, in fact) had an hour to play the records which had influenced him most. It was obvious that everything he played sounded just like Mercury Rev. It was as if he had been hearing this music when he was nine years old and it had taken him that long to get the music down on tape. All the singers on those records sang just the way he does. This suggested an egocentric regime of art, where everything you like reflects your basic wishes and everything else basically flows past you leaving your head untouched. The ego is to poetry what the fiddle is to bluegrass.

The dataset we are looking at definitely is not the cultural field. Older poets are critically under-represented. I noticed at some point that Christopher Logue was not anywhere in these anthologies, but obviously he was being read by a large number of people. This led to a closer look at ages. The core of this dataset is poets born between 1939 and 1963. I count some 370 of them. The pressure of analogy is overwhelming. The poets of a single generation are present in almost unbearable density. It's just too many. You can be sure that virtually all the poets in the list want to be at centre stage, with their voice coming over loud and clear and distractions, like other poets, kept to the absolute minimum. The analogical field may not be the landscape in which they wish to be filmed.

**Method**

I looked for names which overlap in 15 anthologies published between 1985 and 1996, including about 450 different poets, by my count. Quite a few significant poets are missed from these anthologies, as well as diverse insignificant ones. A count of the overlaps shows aesthetic distances: out of 156 possible paired links between two anthologies, only 52 actually exist; or, out of about 6,000 possible overlaps of names, about 174 exist. The pattern is sharp and becomes sharper if we go to a second stage and regroup the 15 anthologies into 7 clusters.

This is an attempt to make implicit knowledge visible and shared. It is subject to criticism and modification in order to make it more visible and sharable. Because poets write more than one poem, they may not
fit snugly into a point in the space proposed. One may occupy three or four non-adjacent cells in a 3D space. The model proposed here relies on the ability of the editors of anthologies to identify genuine cultural fault lines, or genuine temporary identities if you will. Their errors of judgement would tend to invalidate the relevance of the model to the poetry audience.

The poem is enforced by analogy; isolated by adaptation; structured by choice between averages and extremes; stretching to touch both originality and transparency; interpreted through norms; using shared means to develop something unique.

**Groups**

A list of anthologies follows. Probably, they show, together, the horizon of 1995, the attitudes which people in 1995 typically held:

1. *the new british poetry*; 2. *Conductors of Chaos*;
10. *Agenda, an Anthology 1959-93*; 11. *Angels of Fire*;

**Boundaries**

The groups are as follows. (The parts of *the new british poetry* abbreviated as tnpb 1, tnpb 2, etc.)

(A) feminist / women’s / (grading into) young pop-mainstream.
( *Purple, tnpb2, Angels, 60WP, TNP*)

(B) Black and South Asian

*tnpb1*

(C) intellectual

*AVA, tnpb3, tnpb4, CofC, OofE*
(D) Scottish
*Dream, Contraflow, Makars*

(E) young & amateur
*The Stumbling Dance*

(F) traditional & low
*Outsiders, Agenda*

(G) Anglo-Welsh
The Urgency of Identity

Poets who “overlap” two clusters are 49/450, or 11%. To put this another way, the poetic groups are 89% sealed tight. This confirms that the boundaries are real. A provisional analysis of another 10 anthologies found that they made the boundaries more robust.

Additions to this array drawn from other sources include (cluster H) the Jungian direction (variously, mythic, Gothic, psychotherapeutic, into primitive religion, based on folklore, etc.) which has produced some very interesting poetry disliked by most editors; on show in magazines like Temenos, Ore, and Memes. There is no source here for the continuance of the academic mainstream of the 1950s (cluster I), although (10) does include this line. Peter Levi, Geoffrey Hill, and Anthony Thwaite are significant poets in this area. There is no focused collection of Pop poetry, but it is impossible to think about Pop anyway, and its influence is strong in (3). Using this list has the advantage that generalisations can be made on the basis of the named books, not committing anyone to a version of the whole poetry landscape, which is too vast.

1. the new british poetry, edited Allnutt, D’Aguiar, Mottram, Edwards; 1988, 360pp., 85 poets.

This will be referred to as the Muckle/Sinclair anthology, since John Muckle conceived it and Iain Sinclair was the overall coordinator after Muckle left. It is divided into four sections, each edited by a different person. The total of 85 poets makes the book tantalising. The alliance of these disparate groups reflects a political association in the wider world, in fact of the New Left with its sporadic fusion of feminists, ethnic minorities, and middle-class Marxists. The harking back to the mid-70s (made explicit by Mottram at p.132) points to a chronological problem with a group that was supposed to be the future: that of having retired exhausted in about 1977, and gone on to be a stable and benign community, avoiding trouble and looking nostalgically back at its heyday. The contrast between oppressed groups practising “identity politics” by asserting themselves, and “arrived” groups regarding cultivated poetry as that which criticises the elementary processes of the self, is striking. It is legitimate to see this arrangement either as the fragmentation of the counter-cultural hopes of 1968 into small and bitterly defended territorial units, or as a magnanimously shared space, open
for interactions and contacts across borders. The second stroke whereby the counterculture moved into the centre was by now obviously not going to occur, having been overtaken by the splitting of poetry into a spectrum of independent markets, as throughout mature commodity capitalism. The broad sweep of the anthology disguises the fact that it is distributed along a periphery, the parts separated from each other by the excluded centre, of mainstream poetry, by now a combination of the reformed (and purged?) academic traditionalism of the 1950s with the pop themes of the 1960s.

The different principles of selection of the four sections (splitting neatly into two groups) oppose sociological belonging (being a woman, being in an ethnic minority) to formal skill or risk. These boundaries can be analysed in terms of baffles (blocks which confine energy to a space close to its source) and of fidelity to social geometry. The boundary provides guarantees to the reader that they are not allying themselves with someone who is not on their side. The implication (that some poets expressed their belonging to a group and raised its status, so raising and belonging) may have been more of a marketing ploy than a reality. The chiastic implications of the division – that poems which appealed through sociological identity lacked any sense of style, and that women or people from racial minorities who wrote experimentally rather than raisingly were disloyal, that only highly educated white males wrote art poetry, that pleasure depends on a flattering picture of the group to which one belongs – may all be untrue, but they did occupy much of the time spent discussing poetry in this period.

\textbf{tnbp} \begin{flushright} \textit{Section 1. ‘Black British Poetry’, ed. Fred D’Aguiar} \end{flushright}

“I did try to tell her something of what was oppressing my mind: more than half of all English words directly or indirectly slur blackness – and I was teaching the bloody language and the bloody literature and also actually writing my novels in it.” —Dambudzo Marechera, from \textit{The House of Hunger}.

The introduction disclaims completeness in favour of “cross-section and... representation”; says that the poems “tend to argue not just with themselves and with each other, but with society as a whole”; says that although poetry “cuts across race and class” these divisions do not vanish; says that the division between oral and literary poetry
is declining. The selections are diverse in style and also mix Urdu with Jamaican poets.

The Black section, carefully partitioned off so that readers don’t have to pay any attention to other people’s sections, offers the seductive potential of a world periphery, a kind of free trip to a different and exotic topography and sociology. The problem of consuming exoticism is always that, the more exotic the message is, the less comprehensible it is. The more remote Caribbean poetry is from the British cultural context, the more peripheral and ignorable it becomes for a British reader.

The idea of erasing your own code, of pouring yourself out to the periphery, suggests that this experience will be significant: reading Black poetry will not be like reading White poetry, it will take you somewhere and be progressive and unselfish.

Oral poetry (as rapping, toasting, mike chanting, etc.) is popular in the Black community. This has a destructive influence on the printed version, which does not have the added attractions of music, beer, and dance. Contacts with the home islands are very close, and this means a steady flow, not just of reggae records, but also of “dub poetry” and other cultural adaptations from the other side of the ocean.

Caribbean sociolinguistics are peculiarly complex and locally variable. On anglophone Caribbean islands, as I understand it, the upper class speak something very similar to RP English, and the graduations from that to a creolised basilect correspond to social status. Psychological problems follow; this produces an almost ineluctable pressure to stylistic polarization, so that it would become impossible to write about ideas in patois or about intimate feelings in Standard English. On the island, in situ, this elaborate structure supplies rather precise information, useful for characterization, humour, etc.; but transfer the speakers to England, and speech differences no longer supply valid information. The use of patois in poetry in fact aligns with a naïve self-presentation. Patois carries, at least potentially, a nationalist and lower-class charge.

The audience expectation of colonial peoples involves authenticity and untouchedness. Like other myths of the periphery, this involves the concept of depth: in the depths of the slums; in the abyss; deep patois. This expectation of profound homogeneity discourages self-consciousness in the author. We also use the word deep of colours.

The funding agencies put indirect pressure on Black artists to be conservative and populist in form, because they want their campaign
to promote ethnic arts to be visibly Black and visibly ethnic, and they feel much more secure about this if the art in question involves patois, yams, coloured clothing, and a beat-box. There is a niche for this kind of thing, a circuit. A Black artist who is being conceptual or, heaven preserve us, avant-garde, is likely to vanish from sight.

Section 2. “feminist quote unquote poetry”, ed. Gillian Allnutt

The introduction starts by Allnutt confessing that she no longer knows what “feminist” means and goes on to define “feminist poetry” in terms so vague I can’t paraphrase them. “‘Objective’ and ‘representative’ are to me man-made words or illusory concepts.” She says she has no idea about chronology: the publication of feminist poetry over the past 20 years has been haphazard and piecemeal. She has applied various criteria of choice. The subjects of the poems include “love, death, war, international politics, music, dolphins”. There is a “continuity” in the pages selected which is too subtle to be seen clearly.

The poems are diverse but mostly share an aversion to complex syntax, to organised knowledge, and to criticising people: the immediate data of consciousness of a single person are the visible matter of the poem. This is presumably reassuring for people. The external, social, level where different voices are heard, and disagree, or debate, is not taken on. Presumably, in other poems, in other sections of the book, where the immediate data of consciousness are questioned (of which de-natured language is the token), people find this anxiety-making?

The simplicity of the style could be seen as a vast lack of curiosity; but the retort to this is that someone who doesn’t want to read about other people’s daily life, or is selective about just whose life he wants to consume, is also suffering from lack of curiosity.

Section 3. ‘A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry’, edited by Eric Mottram

Mottram’s introduction identifies his poets with “The British Poetry Revival” (BPR), resisting past metrics and irony; committed to invention or exploration and taking up modern poetics from abroad. He defines a central British poetry from 1956 to 1982, ironical, defensive, and
facing away from the world: the Movement and its heirs. He lists some “in” magazines and publishers of the alternative scene. All but two of the poets included were published in *Poetry Review* during his tenure there in 1971-7. As he explains, there was a row at the Poetry Society, which led to the resignation of most of the elected board and to the end of his stint as editor; this was a traumatic event, perhaps the only event one can point to in a landscape where most processes are long-term and statistical in nature. It accelerated the disappearance of Mottram’s crew into the underground, and the interruption of the progressive tradition, which exerted remarkably little influence on British poetry in the 1980s. It is the dissatisfaction of very large sections of the reading public with the sanitized alternative which has given rise to the current uncertainty and instability.

The poets in ‘A Treacherous Assault’ (what Mottram was accused of) represent, therefore, a marginal formation for the retail market; they are not so much as mentioned in books, supposedly about modern British poetry, by Donald Davie, Neil Corcoran, Alan Robinson, or Anthony Thwaite.

The poets included mostly have a strong connection either with Cambridge or with London, or both. The concept of marginality is stylistic; a theory which locates marginality in a geographical area, or in a sociologically defined class, e.g. of non-graduates, is wrong. The public was sold a spatial metaphor in whose terms everybody in London, or in the South, is successful and conventional, and everyone anywhere else is unorthodox and virtuous and neglected. Although these are the great poets who emerged in the Sixties, a glance at almost any survey or anthology from that time will show a completely different picture, a different array of poets; the real picture of that decade only emerged with hindsight.

These poets do not fit well into anthologies; their interest has moved away from fine phrases and instant impact towards deeper aspects of poetic process. In order to make exploration possible, it’s necessary to silence the leftovers of the previous aesthetic, to silence the reassuring chatter of the DJ-like figure who fills the space of traditional poems.

All of your ideas
begin life again
when you wake up
your faithful servants, already at work
in their accustomed places
like clothes neatly folded on the chair
which no one else could wear
in quite your way, grown fat
on the success of small ambitions
which you dream about
and can’t outgrow
like permanent convalescence
there’s no escaping them.
The way your friends remember you
clips over like paper
cut to fit a larger model
(…)
Drop a coin into the slot
and a kind of truth comes out
I SPEAK YOUR MIND
One foot cheating on the ground
(Andrew Crozier, from *High Zero*, a book excerpted in *tnbp*)

To break out of the deadlock of babbling yet cultured inanity, it was necessary to empty the text, shedding surface appeal and recognizability; a new universe of discourse was opened by using rules to generate new procedures. These rules replaced the existing rules of domestic realism; the poet ceases to impersonate himself in the poem, making way for something speculative and new. In excerpt, this poetry is arresting and tantalizing, rather than identifiable or satisfying; it thrives when taken in extenso.

*tnbp* Section 4. ‘Some Younger Poets’, edited by Ken Edwards

This group is, largely, the “alternative” poets born in the 1950s. Almost all the poets included hung out at the same workshop/readings series in North London – which suggests they *weren’t* a whole generation. The introduction does little to define them except by pushing them into the story of the older poets who were big in the mythological and defining era of the 1970s. Otherwise, it repeats what Mottram has already said about the BPR and the Poetry Society fracas, gives a negative description of the mainstream poetry of the 1980s, and talks about the means
of production. Edwards’ definition of their commonality is actually a repeat of what Andrew Crozier said in the Introduction to *A Various Art* (at p.14) about the previous generation. He does say that this generation get their impulse from the previous generation of British writers, and not (as before) by reacting against the established British poets and imitating American models. In this context, it’s possible to suspect that this age-group failed to compete with their elders for the scant resources available, weren’t aware of each other, didn’t get their books out, and weren’t very visible even to Ken Edwards at this point in time. Essentially the same group re-appear in *Conductors of Chaos*, eight years later, so we don’t have to dwell on them now. He quotes two of the women poets protesting against the restrictive assumptions of some feminists about what liberation or self-assertion mean. He says that poetries now “speak for and to communities” defined by “culture, politics, gender identity and geographical locus” but doesn’t define what community section 4 speaks to or how this affects poetic form. He doesn’t mention any new innovations since 1976. For a group defined by innovation, this might be a crisis.


The introduction says “The work I value most is that which seems the most remote, alienated, fractured” and speaks of “Pulp and poetry, the most extreme cultural responses, trapped in a clandestine marriage.” As for selection, it is personal, and he says “The voices here are the ones that have been locked away, those who rather enjoy it.”

The poetry included has been described as radical, modernist, experimental, non-realistic, countercultural, dissident, theoretical. The poems are distributed around the edge of something missing: normality. They are exceptionalist poems, protests against restriction, routine, probability, fixed sequences of ideas. We can propose a cluster of features to site this poetry: {contestatory subjective conjectural autonomous individualist ideas-driven constructed montage unrestricted unfamiliar mutated}.

Sinclair offers B. Catling as an exemplar for the collection, and dedicates the whole thing to the late Eric Mottram; the ‘names list’ suggests that *Conductors* is extremely close to sections 3 and 4 of *tnbp*, but is eight years later and includes a new generation of poets. Within
this cluster we can detect two trends, carried out by rival groups known as the Cambridge and London schools. The geographical terms do not describe where the poets live or studied. In the “London” group, we can detect a rejection of convention, replaced by a language-game in which events are monotonous and energetic, as if liberation meant being free from differentiation and qualification. In the “Cambridge” tendency, classically summed up by the collection A Various Art, we can point to a reflexive approach, where the poet’s self is always present, and the action tends to be the play of nuances within the moral and aesthetic tribunal controlling the self’s behaviour towards others. The London school moves towards a state of jumping up and down shouting, whereas the Cambridge school moves towards painting and philosophy. One is a fast and dirty aesthetic, one is a cool aesthetic. In London there is an interest in graphic poetry and sound poetry, the disintegration of words and of phonemes, as if totality were to be reached by breaking down the primary rules of language; seeing Cambridge poetry as not being battered and regressed enough.

The roughness of some of the language leaves it open to being interpreted as careless and badly finished. The superabundance of implicit statements possibly points to a shared identity of the creators and the target audience, as a group which has lived together for twenty years and has unstated common values – which, indeed, would be profoundly bored by the statement of these common values. This can be compared with the greater social and geographical diversity of an anthology like The New Poetry, which has minimised the ideas content and simplified the style in order to meet an unprimed audience. Every poet here is extremely stylised; if the start point is improbable, the improbability grows with every successive line, which fits in exactly with the previous ones and does not drift back towards the ordinary. Clearly, the poem is growing out of the idea of itself; it is partly a hypothesis, partly auto-suggestion, perhaps an anxiety hallucination; the brain programme which thinks and hypothesises is as much writing the material of the poem as the programme which takes in information, and continually updates it, from the outside world. The observer is the subject as much as the observed. The inside of the poem is as much like a museum or a philosophical argument, as like a length of film of a domestic scene. The principle of association of components in the poem can be either simultaneity in space and time or logical and emotional affinity.
Sinclair reports of his subjects that “They will recall their contributions to the anthology a dozen times [...] They make impossibly complex demands on the typesetters, are a mass of precise and insane instructions. It matters so much, life and death: the furies have to be appeased/ antagonised on a single page.” The myopia which makes tiny differences of weight visible opens up a new universe, mutated at molecular level. He shows them quarrelling with each other – totally involved with each other’s texts and demanding total purity.

The home range of *Conductors* is birth years from 1936 to 1963, but it includes five poets of the Forties – David Jones, J.F. Hendry, W.S. Graham, Nicholas Moore, and David Gascoyne – as ancestors. The absence of any of the poets from *tnbp* 1 and 2 – i.e. the feminists and the racial minorities – can be taken as an indication that Sinclair does not like the work of those poets, or that the target audience does not like it; conversely, the lack of market presence of the poets who do get selected can be interpreted as a mass opting by the left-intellectual audience against left-intellectual poets.


The boundary is poets who have emerged since 1982, the date of an anthology which the editors regard as canonical. The introduction talks of “the hierarchies of values … disappearing”, “flux”, “accessibility, democracy and responsiveness”, “death of the national consensus”, “ironic social naturalism”, “the marginal becoming central”, “pluralism”, “multicultural”, “challenge the centre”, “a questioning of ideas about poetic authority, sincerity, and authenticity”, “above all sceptical”, and claims a great diversification of British poetry starting in 1980, ignoring the British Poetry Revival catalogued by Eric Mottram in 1974. Perhaps the most significant point about *The New Poetry* is that it excludes every single poet in *Conductors*; or vice versa; a strip of cognitive dissonance which crackles.

The first two times I wrote about this anthology I stressed the weaker poets. They were distracting, but of course the good ones are what really matters. Examination of the poets closest to the boundary will show that several of the *Conductors* aren’t complex or intelligent and that several of the ‘light’ poets in *The New Poetry* are brilliant and far from