

# SAMPLER

*On the Margins of Great Empires*

Also by Andrew Duncan

## Poetry

*In a German Hotel*

*Cut Memories and False Commands*

*Sound Surface*

*Alien Skies*

*Switching and Main Exchange* \*

*Pauper Estate* \*

*Anxiety Before Entering a Room. New and selected poems*

*Surveillance and Compliance*

*Skeleton Looking at Chinese Pictures*

*The Imaginary in Geometry*

*Savage Survivals (amid modern suavity)* \*

*In Five Eyes* \*

*Threads of Iron* \*

*Radio Vortex* (ed. Norbert Lange — translated into German)

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Andrew Duncan

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Margins of  
Great Empires

—Selected Poems—

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## Foreword

Age 23, age 50. You can't be the same person over 30 years. The voice is at first young and excitable, later on serene and even slothful. The poems don't converge on a focal point, and if there was a method, it was volatility and volubility. The poems come in groups and remain stranded in time. Frames close and open. If you weren't young and ignorant you wouldn't carry out this unrestrained behaviour whose disasters will bring you the embodied knowledge which will enable you to avoid falling off things, including verse forms, when you are older. Yes, yes, yes. Tell me to shut up. My father was a historian of astronomy and my mother taught German to engineers, both at Loughborough. Anywhere near a technological university in the Sixties, a golden horizon beckoned. 1974, leave school and work for a year as a labourer in England and Germany. I did metalworking (for a few months). 1975, study at Cambridge, mainly Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic. It was the barbarian Tripos. Read 8th century sagas, write orderly prose essays in response, want to write Gaelic sagas in response. Was that boundary the pivot of everything? the frame in which perception is held steady, or paralysed? When it came to Anglo-Saxon work made of metal, somatic and abstract memory interfused—this really turned me on. They called it a forgery but it was an anvil.

In 1977-8 I wrote *In a German Hotel*, about being a guest worker, in a punk style approximating to pidgin German, as in a basically Turkish workplace. My voice started up, it wasn't my voice. *Ochre* magazine published this in 1978. After three years of punk I wanted to hear something softer and more expansive. This wasn't exactly an original idea. "The infinite compression of punk breaks up into a boundless release, the rediscovery of melody and colour," I wrote. 1978, move to London and suffer from homesickness. From 1978 to 1987 I was working at the New Southgate works of Standard Telephone and Cable. In 1980-1 I wrote *Threads of Iron*, "attempting [...] documentary poetry about the situation at work, where the basic power relations never slip out of mind: an unending cascade of concrete and puzzling problems, of human conjunctures. The real ordinance of society follows an ideology which is secret, covered by a false public one." J.H. Prynne liked this one a lot and it came out in two parts after a brief delay (*Cut Memories and False Commands* in 1991 and *Switching and Main Exchange* in 2001; the complete manuscript appeared in one volume, finally, from Shearsman in 2013). I didn't get published in

the 1980s. In 1983-87 I wrote *Skeleton Looking at Chinese Pictures*, which was my concerted attempt to be a mainstream poet. Peter Porter liked it a lot but it only came out in 2000. *Surveillance and Compliance* was written between 1987 and 1992 and published in 2004 (it wasn't really finished until then). The firm I worked for hit big trouble in 1986 and shed about 20,000 jobs in two years. *Surveillance and Compliance* was an attempt to write about this from the workforce's point of view. Whatever you write about, people will try to ascribe it to your personality. It is also about Squatland and people whose personalities overwhelmed them so much they simply couldn't do anything else. 'Nimble and competitive', I wrote. Compliance and Surveillance were two IT projects I worked on at a City regulatory body.

At the end of the Eighties, I discovered the poetic Underground. Close up, they weren't invisible. I got involved with other poets of my own age. I wondered why they didn't write like me. Never found out. In 1991, I got a book out. In 1992 I wrote *Sound Surface*, which was a follow-up to *Threads* and came out in 1993. In 1993, I wrote *Alien Skies*, published 1993. This was a detached project about rockets and meteorites. *Pauper Estate* is being on the dole and repeats useful government advice on how to keep warm when you can't afford to turn the heating on. The cold is offset by the smoke of besetting and nostalgic hallucinations not only about an ex-lover but also about industrial activity. It came out in 2000, I had a job by then. *The Imaginary in Geometry* and *Savage Survivals (amid modern suavity)* were written slowly from 1999 and came out in 2005 and 2006. Some of the poems included come from 'Anglophilia, a romance of the docks', a series about staging, or editing, national myth. 'Q-landscapes' is about advertising as "capitalist realism". *Radio Vortex* was my selected poems translated into German and came out in 2017.

"On the margins of great empires" refers to the poem 'When Myth Becomes History' and to folk culture as a buried horizon. I wrote "in *Threads* [...] some of what appears to be folksong is me. Wealth and impoverishment; two strands."

ANDREW DUNCAN

*To Norbert Lange and Ulf Stolterfoht*

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## Turkish Music

Lightly holding the purple reins  
We leap to the saddle, our tasselled helmets low,  
Our banners fluttering like crimson clouds,  
Writhing like snakes and dragons in the air.  
Deploying in nine rings we laugh to scorn  
This petty Empire. Can the Hans withstand  
The mighty Tartars?  
As we display our might, the roar of the drums  
Strikes fear into all who hear;  
The bugles sound to form the ranks for battle.  
—Hong Sheng, *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (1688), scene 16

Midnight has settled on the village square outside,  
Where the cattle drive twice a day.  
Under my room, in the peasants' house of wood and plaster  
Used by the hotel workers  
Is the room where the work permit men live out five years,  
No family allowed and no respite from the Germans,  
To return to Anatolia with the capital.  
Time lost, knowledge of death;  
Memory lost, narrow and bitter as a knife;  
Hearts lost, a gamble of despair  
With happiness.  
I think of my home but see nothing definite.  
I remember the day. Darkness pours in from the snowy forest  
And there music is falling from the air.

“At home, the landowners form all sides in parliament,  
Control each policy, each wing of the truth.  
The man without money is like a wisp of the air  
Dressed in old clothes and a skin chapped with too many nerves,  
Trying to move against the great wind  
Which moans  
The breadth of the high steppes.  
The poor man trying to move forward out of nothing  
Is like the Yuruk, the nomad shepherd blown march by march

Destroying the grass and fleeing  
Before a force he cannot name.  
Where is he going? he has no rest but his longing,  
No earth but his song.  
Land is like the taint of race darkening the blood,  
Possession is like the rocks: unchangeable.  
Peasants are like animals, they cannot own.

We'll irrigate the desert.  
We'll give the land to the tiller.

Once the conquerors, horse nomads,  
Dealt out the land and broken peoples  
To Counts maintaining soldiers, sipahis—  
The Army created the State, and the nation was a honeycomb of  
warriors.  
We sowed wheat, harvested ranks of men.  
We who were owned, owned nothing.  
Nomads, with flocks of men... Today we own nothing  
And the rich are not bound to service...

When will I own the farm I served with hand and eye?  
When I leave this country  
(I have never learnt German)  
I will buy a flock of white sheep  
I will buy a flock of black sheep  
I will buy a grove of lemon trees.  
I will raise tomatoes, on that ground more fertile than any other.  
I will raise a family to work it.  
We will grow enough to eat.  
I will buy a share of land, as much as I can till.  
No more hunger. But then, the distributors, the buyers..."

They drink and laugh late into the German morning.  
We start work at 7:30.  
They play electric Turkish music.  
It is like the furls  
Of molten bronze poured into a cauldron of milk.  
It is as if the ashes of night

Shone through with the red grate of stellar fire.  
As if the Scorpion, fiery, pinned to the apex of sky,  
Arched.  
It was like the spasm of my most contorted and strong nerves.  
It was like understanding the language of birds.  
It was like the taste of copper earth, acrid and binding for ever.  
It was the spice of air.  
I want to sleep. Instead I listen to this music.  
It is as if the waterways of ore within the earth  
Belled.

My breath, gasp and heart's heart, is outside me.  
I riffle an unskined pack of memories, heartless shadows.  
I have no dwelling in this earth, no possession.  
The fields are lonely because they are not English.  
I pine for those sensations.  
Can you tell me where my country lies?

Does the wind  
Turn the dust into birds?  
Such are embers of a total song  
For whom the earth is nothing but what passes  
Hidden in a shriek of wind and blood,  
Of passage and ardour  
Song, flown from a far country,  
Masonry of the invisible cities,  
Architecture of the streets of longing,  
Where the singing of women is heard behind barred, fretted windows.  
It may be the songs of lovers,  
Gay goshawks fluttering against those lattices;  
Or the wailing for dead husbands, archaic—  
The voice of stone shattering—  
Stomach knotted with aloes, resin of sharpness, tight throat;  
*Agit*, barb of frenzy.

Because I know you will never understand my song  
Because I know I will never understand this music  
Because when you sing, at work,  
The heedless song is alien in your throats; because my thoughts are lost in  
The distance towards home;

I know beauty is not a form, but affection, a memory  
Of your mother, or breath purified in a kiss.  
The face in my heart is hard for me to see.  
Once we danced and sang in front of men,  
Shouting aloud the words we hear when alone.  
Exhaustion beat the devils and motion fired our cold clay.  
Running in shapes, we left everything behind  
And sang in the metre of the triple leap:  
triumpe, triumpe, triumpe...  
Our dancing days are done. And you drink to forget everything:

“In the Altai mountains,  
In Turkestan, in the time of the making of nations  
When men were hardly different from soil  
The first Turk lived with his sheep and mares.  
Our people lived in a valley of brass ringed by an iron mountain.  
There was no path through the dark rock  
Till we were led to freedom by a grey wolf,  
Into the world by a hidden path.  
The great steppes were lit by a Sun of blazing iron,  
Rare grasses led us over beckoning plains...”

Led by a wolf to the slums of the city  
We blow through German streets  
Like scraps of newspaper  
Absorbing dirt  
Always empty.

Protect us, great dervish.  
We are so many, none can count us  
We are so many, none can defeat us  
We are so few, no enemy can find us.  
We are so many, none can feed us.  
We must go to foreigners to ask for rule.  
We are sons of the Sun and the whole earth is ours.  
We take orders from those who take orders.

Give us  
The song in the language in which our names are pure and no longer insults,

The air with the Arabian or Balkan flourishes  
Like the song used to melt the pain of surgery  
In the mountains of the east, where there are few doctors.  
There the men sing more strongly than the knife  
The song of opium, chant like a second heart  
That lets the mind float free in its strength.  
Be with us, great dervish. We are so many  
None is lonely. None is proud.

We were conquerors, we were slaves.  
Will we rise one day when this world ends  
Across the bridge of fire and the labouring day  
To the space distilling like resin from a slashed tree,  
Where the walls of each soul give way  
And we are one?"

Up here, I have no music. The melody eludes the tongue.  
The lone Puritan voice in the white room  
Moves upward from the realm of passions.  
We have advanced by severance, deriving thought from loneliness.  
The neoterics  
Search out archaic words and the unreal past;  
And ritualists teach rosaries not knowing what they mean.  
Since we have no common and musical speech  
Language is reduced to tags of class.  
In each image they see a room  
And in each room a social rank.

This is a room for kitchen workers to sleep in,  
But what we feel is free and up to us.  
In the raw night the black storm of music—  
You'd think the house poured brandy down a throat of garlic—  
Plucks my nerves although my limbs are still.  
Pictures run in my head and I am the pictures.  
I love this electric music,  
Its violence is like the writhe of struggling men, working men.

Each new form is made in the dark  
And the old one is like soil buried beneath the earth.  
As the millennia of tradition become a basic silence;

When the ornamentation has borne itself down,  
And worked itself into a flower with no stem;  
When the unspent day is a cruelly stylized space;  
I'll remember  
Turkish music.

“The drinkers of fermented mares’ milk;  
The pagans who anointed their Banners with milk in triumph;  
The smokers of opium, chasing the heavy fumes  
Like the red heart of a black night;  
Drink in this landscape of man,  
These woods-and-fields of man,  
And are pined.

I would like to sit beside the Aegean  
Watching the fishing boats drift home at dusk.  
I would pour water into the raki,  
Which turns cloudy, the colour of lion’s milk.  
I would eat a lemon, to give it sharpness;  
I would eat roast beef, to give it weight.  
My family would be there beside me  
I would lack for nothing.”

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## In Charnwood

Three kinds of smooth: floods of the Soar, silver sheets of miles,  
Black cleaves of rock, chafed and faced by forceful rain;  
Slick clay, wet and split by a fork, or smooth inside itself.

Three kinds of red:

Red of hawthorn hedge, like a haze on the meshed twigs;  
Red of the outcrop of rock at Mountsorrel;  
Red light in the afternoon on walls, faces, clouds.

Three names of the province;

Coritani, worshippers of the Goddess Trent;  
Raisers of the earthworks at Caer Lyr.  
Mercia, the March: the military frontier. Landless mercenaries  
Gnawed the Combrogues to the bone of garrisoned Snowdonia.  
Charnwood: burnt forest. Before America, this Great Wood  
Or Hercynian darkness of wolves and mistletoe  
Fed the seaward colonists.  
Ash-keels tilled the North Sea, Swan's way;  
Fire drowned the stands of oak and beech.  
Ash as rich as coin and fine as silk  
Mulched the won fields.  
In February, the burning;  
In August, the reaping.

Three kinds of yellow:

Yellow of corn in July, Iraqi reed turned to fruit;  
Yellow of hair, blond Danelaw strain, fair in the five boroughs,  
Nordic light pointing-up the Indic raven on the street;  
Yellow foam-flecks under the granite step of a waterfall.

Three kinds of curve:

The boar-back ridge, still untilled, lunge frozen;  
The River Idle, winding through reed-beds, slow in the flat;  
Pap dribbling down the bib of the earth.  
Volutes of Coritanian metalwork,  
Bedded back in the earth as if in the foundry sand once more.

Three kinds of shelter:

Rabbits in the delved conery, litters tippet each other,  
Grass at the door like milk;  
Earwigs in the apple's eye, the Riviera of wintering grubs;  
And me sleeping in the town amongst my family.

Three more kinds of red:

The fox, sharp-set and brainy, roaming for his living;  
Iron case-hardened in an open forge, in the small ironmaster's,  
Like skin it changes on warming;  
The coke shimmers and swims, neither gravel- nor starling-tint;  
Stubble burning off in September, red and black in stripes  
Like the furrows of happiness and sadness.

Three kinds of path:

Way of the bird in the air.  
Folded winds are pillows of velocity.  
He scoops up a song on a hook. One dipped wing  
Will tip the world on its edge.  
Gallery of the miner in the earth; lead and coal  
Strap the stone of thick darkness  
Like muscles rigid in some scouting task.  
That is a path  
Which the eye of the kestrel has not discovered  
Nor the foot of the sons of pride.  
The eater of the darkness to its rim  
Has overturned mountains from the root.  
Third  
Thought's path in the mapped temples  
Fissured like Switzerland.