

The Failure of Conservatism

in modern British poetry

SAMPLER

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*The Failure of
Conservatism
in modern British Poetry*

SAMPLER

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Shearsman Books

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SAMPLER

The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry: Style Time 1960-1997

Newly conservated

Are you doing what you were doing five years ago? Well,
don't make a career out of it.

– Mark E. Smith, heckling a heckler.

And in the
face of the 'new frankness' in immaculate
display in the highest places, why should
the direct question not be put: if any discrete
class with an envisaged part in the social process
is not creating its own history, then who is doing
it for them? Namely, what is anyone waiting
for, either resigned or nervous or frantic from
time to time? Various forms dodge through
the margins of a livelihood, but so much talk
about the underground is silly when it would re-
quire a constant effort to keep below the surface,
when almost everything is exactly that, the
mirror of a would-be alien who won't see how
much he is at home. In consequence also the
idea of change is briskly seasonal, it's too cold
& thus the scout-camp idea of revolution stands
in temporary composure, waiting for spring.

from 'Questions for the Time Being',
by J.H. Prynne, in *Poems*, 1999, p.112

SAMPLER

FOREWORD

TO THE SECOND EDITION

This is a re-issue of a book composed in 1993-5 (last draft 1997) and published in 2003. It was about the failure of conservative poets to write something worth reading and of conservative critics to move their halt line, their death line, beyond 1960. The subject matter was inherently controversial and the presentation caused some disagreements at the time of publication. While the consensus of scholars has progressively moved towards my interpretation, there is still room for a critical review of what I said back then. I have taken this opportunity, owed to the tolerance of a generous publisher, to amend some of its faults. I am aware that reissuing a book now 20 years old could be seen as a conservative act. I have tried to add more exact information and remove the generalisations.

FCon is not a one-volume history of modern British poetry. It was part of a four-volume work on modern British poetry when published. What eventually emerged was seven volumes. (I can't account for the three extra volumes. I just kept writing and trying to describe the material better.) The whole project is called *Affluence, Welfare, and Fine Words*.

What people most want is to find the good stuff without having to wade through the bad stuff. Imagine a TV series with 140 characters. How far do you have to go to give the viewers the ability to tell them apart? You have 140 modern poets of excellence. They are the scene, and the idea of any book is to get them across to the reader. It's no good printing-lists of facts. Obviously you do it by staging arguments, as provocative as possible so that the reader can only resolve them by reading the poems, and by delving into them learns or sharpens distinctions.

Because modern poetry is so little known, the booklist or shopping list is probably the most useful part of the book. Everyone I left out became my lifelong enemy. This list has cost a great deal of effort and soul-searching. After locating Kathleen Nott I had the problem that the 1960 book just wasn't so good, her books of 1947 and 1956 were the really excellent ones. I was worried about this but eventually I added a list of 1950s books which allowed me to get her name in there. I think the connoisseurs were unhappy to see the information about the good stuff made available to a profane public. The 'shopping list' of books of poetry in *FCon* was expanded by about 50 books over the years. I just didn't know enough in 1996. The 300 books are a formidable set of points for any theory to join up and cover. Writing about artistic ideologies, sets of stylistic structures which rise and unite several poets and fade, seemed adequate as thought material

but could not also give salient accounts of all the 140 poets I was interested in. The apples push the (verbal) net out and it loses its shape. Yet this is a good way of capturing all those names, all those styles, in memory. The ideologies were beautiful even when they couldn't be realised.

I know people brandish the idea that 'there is no progress in art' and follow through to say 'therefore my poetry can't be out of date'. They wave Ernst Gombrich's *Kunst und Fortschritt* (Art and Progress). I can't explain why there is no progress in art and simultaneously conventional and old-sounding art is boring. I don't have to explain it. Gombrich did not say, 'Your poetry is not out of date'. The title should possibly have been, 'This device can't be 50 years out of date because I'm still using it'. The reply, from at least some parts of the public, was 'You *are* out of date, Bozo, because you have ignored every innovation of the last 50 years'. When we throw these accusations, they have to be right. Fairness depends on an accurate map of what was new.

The question of originality is too important to be dealt with at the unconscious level. Also, it involves the landscape as a whole; it is essentially about the relations between different poets within the large field of the other poets. In order to be fair to a poet being judged, you have to have a map of the public structure of stylistic conventions and changes. This is what *FCon* sets out to offer. You can't say that someone changed the norms unless you have a firm idea of what those norms were. By defining the creative phase you get closest to the creative core of a poet. Further, it is when you realise how conventional someone is that you become conscious of the convention and that something important about the scene swims into the foreground. Much of the detail of *FCon* is discussing what is up to date at several points in modern times, which has the further effect of locating what is out of date, weary, and clinging. This is not the way to make yourself popular. This volume only has to do that, it's not an evaluation of all the poetry in the period.

Classifying sensations does not get us to the end of our task. There is a deeper level of response that requires us to change. The goal is to get to the middle of a text and to have your centre where the centre of the text is. This produces an instability of viewpoint, a lack of solidity. I don't want to be a solid object. I think the idea of writing criticism is to identify the right psychological position to respond maximally to the art in question. This is a task that prevails over decades. This poetry responds to affection.

I took out the stuff about The Movement because no-one cares about them any more; they aren't worth attacking. I decided that all these flows of opinion are actually groups of people, and that therefore the attacks on conservatives had to go; instead I would empathise with them. Even if

their empire seems to be made of rags and shadows. This will go down as the history that said that about 60% of the good poetry of the period came from the Underground or small-press area. This isn't a political statement, it's about aesthetic quality. Over 20 years, probably every year has seen the consensus move towards this position. A radical position becomes mainstream. It isn't either a claim to know the history of the underground. I collect a few hundred data points without covering the whole territory. I don't understand the history of the underground. Recently I have seen some generalisations about the underground, by participants, which I don't believe. This suggests that there is no consensus. So what is the history a history of? Dissidence is not a constitution. In contrast, I do have some texts. A few texts are patches of knowledge.

I notice a trend among critics of avoiding artistic judgments. I find this problematic. If the art is good, your experience of it is vivid. It is a strong memory, of definite shape. The judgement is the easiest thing to make. If there is no vivid experience to share, this game has to end because there is no ball to play with. We all have to go home. There is a case, isn't there, for throwing away poetry that yields no vivid sensations and no strong memories? It may be true that the more I express what I actually felt, the more people alienate. This may also be the right route to take. There has been an unwritten rule since about 1974 (exact date missing!) that you can't publish a negative review of a female poet. This is a form of social anxiety. The consequence has been a withdrawal from honesty in the public sphere, where the rewards of honesty are meagre and anxiety is powerful. If the longer outcome is that people are scared to make honest artistic judgements, I have to protest. Inhibitions are not a form of prosperity. I don't care whether poetry was popular or not. I'm not interested. Poetry works as art or not at all. What is promoted as objectivity and professionalism is in fact a fear of displeasing influential and articulate people. Maybe professionalism is that, in its own right, abidingly.

One reviewer said he was desperately bored by the Scottish material. Dialectically, I decided to add a lot more about Scottish poetry. I briefly considered throwing out the English poets to make space. This was a projection of geographical bias; the reviewer was not interested in spending time in Scotland. It's the weather and the geology. Like a holiday destination. Maybe every aesthetic judgment is based on geographical perceptions and fantasies, defeating aesthetics. When I re-read *FCon*, I was amazed to see that the essay on George Mackay Brown had not made it into print. I experience a deep emotional regret about not writing enough, over the whole of *Affluence*, about him. So I have added an essay.

FCon was in part a critique of the mainstream and of poets or critics who rejected all the innovations that floated up after 1960. The first criticism I would make of it is that it seizes on the bad mainstream poetry and ignores the good mainstream poetry. A related problem is description of the bad poets in the innovative sector. I did not undertake this, largely to avoid confusing the message. Within *FCon*, specifically, this omission may have been misleading. I left out the poetry I find tedious. This does ask for a few words of explanation. There is no consensus about who is important, so let's start with the full set of poets who think their own work is Significant and who expect to find themselves covered (wrapped? uncovered?) in a book about modern poetry. That would be about 2,000 poets, I think. So in the end I wrote about the poets I like. Actually, I think some of my colleagues have written the history of tedious poetry. I don't believe the blurbs of books and I don't believe the opinions of the people who wrote the blurbs and massaged the market. Writing history is not just recycling what conservative (and even conniving) editors selected and silencing what they rejected. That is not the half line.

Most of the poets discussed had careers after the cut-off point of 1997. I have decided not to describe these because I believe in frustration and believe it should be left intact. The basis of need is craving: to get why a poem published in 1986 was necessary, you have to reconstruct the limits of being alive in 1986, the need for new creativity, the heroic quality of original endeavour. To make everything available must mean satiation.

I see I have used a non-standard term: *mega-visual*. This refers to the production of oversized and blaring images, intrusive and authoritative, of which huge advertising hoardings and huge cinema screens are the most obvious examples. Yet the line goes back a long time. Both Nazi and Soviet art included an important mega-visual component, and this points back to antecedents in history painting for monarchs and others, public monuments, probably Roman imperial art, Pergamum, Egyptian royal art. The concept was developed by Peter Fuller.

The original edition did not thank anybody, because I was unhappy with the advice people had given me. This time I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Simon Smith and Harry Gilonis in compiling the original list of good books in 1995; and Paul Holman, Gavin Selerie, and John Goodby for precise and unusual information.

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

“It’s also important to remember that in-group cooperation evolved partly in response to competition between groups.”

– *New Scientist*, 25/7/2015

GÖRTSCHACHER’S TIME-LINE OF POETRY MAGAZINES

It seems helpful to give a map of large-scale public movements, as handholds. This account is based on the Austrian scholar Wolfgang Görtschacher’s extraordinarily thorough study of little magazines, the most detailed research yet done on our period. He names 4 periods: the 1950s; the British Poetry Revival era of 1959-77, with a flourishing and creative scene; a mass demise of magazines and conservative reaction from 1978 to 1985; and a period, hard to describe, from then up till 1993. In what follows I paraphrase his account.

(1) The sterility and narrowness of the 1950s may have been related to the scarcity of publishing outlets, at first paper shortages and then inflation wiped out most of the little magazines. Wrey Gardiner records as one of the reasons for giving up *Poetry Quarterly* in 1953: ‘My printer’s bill was about ten times what it had been in 1940.’ Malcolm Bradbury told Görtschacher, ‘The whole thing changed totally in the 1950s, because there was this massive jump in printing costs. The whole world of magazines was altered by the massive cost of printing one.’ This was a decade in which alternatives had literally disappeared.

(2) ‘During the late 1950s and early 1960s an upsurge of little-magazine and small-press activities occurred, which resulted in many British poets’ reception of American and Continental influences’, followed by ‘the resurgence and proliferation of little magazines during the late 1960s’. The expansion of higher education provided the social milieu for the new magazines, and the ‘Mimeograph Revolution’ supplied the reprographic capability: ‘The proliferation of little magazines in the 1960s partly occurred in consequence of technical developments, i.e. the conversion from letterpress to offset printing, that enabled a single person to produce a little magazine without any constraints as to aesthetic visual art.’ This low-cost technology ended, in the first half of the 1960s, the cultural dominance of London. An affluence of supply led to a luxuriation of styles. The Arts Council’s engagement with poetry, still trivial in 1964, took off in

1965-66. There was the 'heyday of little magazines in the late 1960s and early 1970s'; in the 1960s, there were 2,000 poetry magazines (p.503), but the numerical peak was in the early 1970s. These 'zines did tend to have low print quality, messy layouts, and stapled spines.

(3) The commodity boom of the 1970s multiplied the price of paper, and inflation eventually provoked consumer withdrawal: 'The late 1970s saw the greatest slaughter on the British little-magazine scene that had ever occurred.' 'The major cut in experimental magazines has produced lacunae of adequate forums...' A decrease in sales had (undiscussed) analogies in the decline of political enthusiasm. 'The swing back to conservatism that Jim Burns had ascertained in 1981 has manifested itself in most little magazines.' p.31. There is a drift towards photocopying, from low-grade typescript, and therefore to the A4 format, stapled.

(4) 'After a period of decline of little magazine activities during the late 1970s and early 1980s [...] the number of little magazines seems to have been catching up again with the heyday [of] the early 'seventies.' In the second half of the 1980s, he says, 'This technical evolution [availability of microprocessors and desktop publishing (DTP)] and a reawakened enthusiasm for the arts – in consequence of the individual's retreat from public life to his self, motivated by a strong feeling of apathy towards politics in certain strata of British society – seem to have been responsible for [...] the second revival of little magazines after 1945.' The professionalisation of DTP packages and the advent of the desktop laser printer push little magazines and small presses to a new zenith of quality. '(L)ittle magazines have been booming since 1986, both in terms of sheer number of titles, contents, and quality of production...' p.211

We can check this 'fever chart' of gross activity levels in the poetry world against the chronology in Martin Booth's book, oriented more towards readings, which offers a decade of goodness and growth 1964-74 and a decade of decline and sterility 1974-84, which is when his treatment stops. Both readings and magazines are only here as measures of an overall metabolic rate of poetry: numbers and enthusiasm.

CENSUS OF BOOKS

I have sporadic counts for overall numbers of books being published: the Poetry Book Society checklist for 1960 gives 131 + 27 anthologies. Then

Poet's Yearbook for a year running 1976-7 gives 906 books + 68 anthologies. Then a count by the Arts Council gives 1944 books for 1995.

The number of titles has grown by a factor of thirteen. It is as if we are talking about two different eras here: the position of 1957 is irrecoverable. In between has come the arrival of lifestyle choice as the central thing in everyone's life, even if that also means the growth of commercialism to supply the disposables which the choice requires. Without much doubt, the change has been good for the reader but bad for critics who want their expertise to be intact in the face of data too rapid and diverse to assimilate. That is: you can have whatever poetry you want but you can't have the information that would let you get at it. These figures agree with what Görtschacher says. It is evident that reviewing takes account of the merest fraction of this deluge. The good part is that there may be a whole undiscovered country, and the book I am writing holds the key. The bad part is I also only know about a fraction of this material.

Poet's Yearbook runs, awkwardly, from June to June. Its volume for 1978 shows about 25% titles from High Street publishers and 75% from "small presses". The huge growth in output from small to micro-businesses is a key feature of the era. Were all the uncommercial concerns running radical, innovative, underground poetry? No, the two categories overlap but many of the artists were just unsuccessful mainstream poets. Conversely many advanced and unconventional poets had relations with commercial publishers.

In the period 1960 to 1997, it follows, there were something in the region of 28,000 volumes of poetry published in this country. The expansion itself caused strains and distortions associated with rapid growth. The public did not keep up with developments in poetics and a reaction of incomprehension to the new poetry was widespread. Let's just imagine that you have to read 1000 of these books, chosen at random (and not on the basis of a critic recommending them). You would probably think, as you sat down in a room full of books (locked from the outside of course), that most of them would be repeats: reruns of standard clusters of ideas and effects, made vague by the imprecise faculties of the second-rate, blunt instruments battering at an unresponsive clay. Is this a fair picture? it is something being imagined, but the weight of the term *mainstream* is that it is a turn-off, an idea of the tedious that operates to prevent you from reading a poem.

GOOD BOOKS OF THE 1950S

1950

Christopher Fry, *Venus Observed*;George Barker, *True Confession of George Barker* (part 1);Peter Hellings, *Firework Music* (no date but circa 1949 or 1950)1951 Lynette Roberts, *Gods with Stainless Ears*;Dorian Cooke, *Fugue for Our Time*;Peter Yates, *Light and Dark*;Charles Causley, *Farewell Aggie Weston*

1952

David Jones, *The Anathémata*;Andrew Young, *Into Hades*;W.H. Auden, *Nones*;Kathleen Raine, *The Year One*;Roland Mathias, *The Roses of Tretower*;Edwin Morgan, *The Vision of Cathkin Brigs*. (Young's poem was followed by a sequel in 1958 and it would be eccentric not to read them together.)

1953

Edith Sitwell, *Gardeners and Astronomers*;Robert Graves, *Poems 1953* (*viz.* Collected Poems);Adam Drinan, *Script from Norway*;Patrick Anderson, *The Colour as Naked*

1954

Glyn Jones, *The Dream of Jake Hopkins*;F.T. Prince, *Soldiers Bathing*;Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1933-52*; *Under Milk Wood*;George Barker, *A Vision of Beasts and Gods*;Roy Fuller, *Counterparts*;Alan Ross, *Something of the Sea*;Eithne Wilkins, *Oranges and Lemons* (in a magazine only)

1955

W.S. Graham, *The Nightfishing*;Charles Tomlinson, *The Necklace*1956 Hugh MacDiarmid, *In memoriam James Joyce*;Kathleen Nott, *Poems from the North*;

Christopher Logue, *Devil, Maggot, and Son*

1957

Audrey Beecham, *The Coast of Barbary*;

David Gascoyne, *Night Thoughts*;

Terence Tiller, *Reading a Medal*;

Roy Fuller, *Brutus' Orchard*;

Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain*

1958

Alan Ross, *To Whom it May Concern*

1959

George Mackay Brown, *Loaves and Fishes*;

Christopher Logue, *Songs*;

Geoffrey Hill, *For the Unfallen*;

Peter Redgrove, *The Collector*

I haven't read the Yates volume but to be fair I have read his other books and this one is rare. 45-60, ed. Thomas Blackburn, is the best anthology.

Anyone looking at surviving documents from the 1950s is likely to say that the scene was in a parlous state and that there was a revival. There is some dispute about when things got better. People like to instrumentalise the change, saying something like 'poetry revived when my publishing firm got started' or 'poetry was *so* monochrome until I arrived on the scene and then everything burst into bloom'. To some extent, the ability to ignore when the breakout actually happened depends on conservative critics who denied that it was happening and created an image of sterile conformism. For some people, the greyness of the 1950s lasted until the 1980s. The 'liberation event' is something which both managers and poets *urgently want to claim* as part of their personal trail of achievements and assets, and this is why it is claimed at dozens of different years. The repression process is never claimed as a first person act by any cultural manager but the amount of liberation cannot possibly be greater in quantity than the amount of repression which it undoes. The act of repression is itself repressed from memory. Still it was the 1960s when the numbers of poets and the scope of poetry expanded. It's like British 1950s pop music, British 1950s cinema. Everything got better in the 1960s. In the 1960s. Other claims are instrumentalisations. I don't think you can take a deluge and put it into a pipe and claim to own the pipe.

It would be unfair to depict the 1950s simply as the desert from which life started and not look at what was actually happening at that time. There were certainly people writing poetry. But as you speak of the big take-off in the 1960s, barriers being burst, etc., it is easier to speak of the 1950s as a greyed out decade. I think you can say a lot of people were frustrated.

The issue of mid-century cultural decline asks to be explained.

HOMOGENEITY

Kenneth Allott's standard anthology of mid-century poetry, titled *British Poetry 1918-60* (first edition 1950, though) is a summary of the poetic culture which mainstream poets in 1960 had access to. I counted that 40.8% of the poets included had studied at Oxford university. Some 40 years later, the entries for British poets in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry in English*, edited by Ian Hamilton (1994), include 367 names of whom 111 studied at Oxford University – a mere 30%. That is, the 20th century draws to an end and Oxford is still dominant. This makes us ask if the standard kind of poem was actually being written by a standard kind of person. One way of reacting is to suggest fantastic levels of bias for Allott and Hamilton. That does not work very well, they were basically recording the standard picture. Another way is to feel gratitude – these writers made efforts to give us pleasure, they rose above simply recording personal experience and into literature. Another is to see it as the realisation in aesthetic terms of the power structure of a society.

I read a work on genealogy which looked at a large set of saints in a European country and reckoned that most of them were related to the royal family in the region they lived in. The spiritual hierarchy is intimately related to the ranking of men in the society of daylight and real estate. Rather than seeing social prestige as an accidental quality of a high proportion of the poets who achieved cultural prestige, we could see their literary success as a passive and smooth delivery of the social prestige to an audience who were highly sensitive to that kind of thing and who wanted to consume it. This delivery of relations of property and competitive success (in exams and so on) carried things which already existed – it would be truly perverse, in this circuit, to be anything except conservative. A critical attitude could only damage the commodity which was the essential charge of the reading experience. The poetry book would then be like a weekend in a tourist destination, to be exact Oxford. You would not start such a weekend by blowing up all the buildings.

Almost none of the people on the scene would tolerate this *delivery of prestige* as a statement of poetic intent. The Left sympathies prevail throughout, and there is no neo-conservative party in poetry, as in other arts. But it is debatable that this is the unconscious rule of the game. If you start to say that you want to make everything conscious, you must overturn the rules of poetry – the intuitive practices which are also the lair of conservative values. We have reached a crisis here – the poetry which challenges everything is the only valid response to the burden of inherited culture and wealth, but simultaneously the new language it produces is unrecognisable and uncomfortable for the existing audience. It would be necessary to invent a new marketing system and a new audience for it to live in. Actually, this is what happened; new language, new audience, new distribution network, all came about.

Everyone in the EngLit business shares the same staple culture, the same carbohydrate pack of texts and clever remarks. But people from Oxford have more of it. The textbooks used by schools and other universities are likely to be by Oxford graduates. The industry has a vertical structure: some places are closer to the apex than others. The apex is, probably, in a certain group of streets in Oxford. Thus the dominant poem reproduces the axis of domination of the literature industry. But there is a public which is not tied to universities. They are not expected to put their artistic feelings into organised prose. Reading the reviews may give a distorted view because there is this wider audience whose reactions are less organised (and more aesthetic), and less vocal.

The community believed it was open but was noticeably homogeneous. The identification we talked about was exceptionally easy to carry out because it was covering such a short distance. Is identification a form of narcissism? A lot of poets suspect that the reader – a certain reader, a group of readers, anyone – does not identify with their poems because they belong to the wrong social class or the wrong ethnic group. This is unverifiable and people who invest in that belief may be blocked off from criticising their own writing and so from improving it beyond the most basic level of assertion and recitation. It is helpful to discuss the act of identification but it may not be possible in the end to drag it out into the light of day. It belongs in the depths and it may explode if you bring it to the surface where pressure is low. I think the immigrant (or second-generation immigrant, etc.) people in the literary world do well to ask how the identification and intimacy constitutive for that world (which would dissolve without them) work in relation to ethnicity and how far the content of the work of art is an offered self which also has a sociological identity. I imagine that identification is the key institution in the culture

we have ('we' may have a boundary here) and that it deserves study in the same way that the law does when you are interested in how society works. Every linguistic act involves categorisation as its basic component. With very few exceptions, Allott leaves out Scottish and Welsh poets. Perhaps he just felt unhappy outside Southern England. I don't think you can make identification a conscious act, but you can be clever about the things you can modulate.

Close reading may have functioned as a premature reprisal against attempts to define the literary act as ethnocentric. However, its popularity with its owners may have been unconsciously an admission that the act was indeed one of narcissism and group egocentricity. Allott used Close Reading to identify 40.8% of significant poets as being Oxford products. In fact close reading was a product of Cambridge, to a large extent. Empiricism is a key principle and I would not want to blank out its purpose. It was there to capture ideology, to drag it to the surface and destroy it by exposure to air. It did not follow that identification, liking, and trust were also detained. But those psychological events acted like ideology. The majority of all complaints in poetry politics are ones about *you identified with him, gave him all your time, gave him all the space, and did not give all that to me*. That would hardly be so if these acts were not the central institutions

Cultural conversation is made more comfortable by homogeneity, but it also has the result that everyone talented is a dissident and an internal exile.

KULTURKRITIK

The complement of the m-stream is the culturally critical poet, the intellectual as poet.

The cultural critic does not present experience as an object of consumption but criticises it and makes it vanish while the shadow of a new and unlivd possibility flickers across it.

The cultural critic does not offer personalities as identification objects but depicts social roles as the product of power relations and manipulations producing alienated behaviour cycles when their origins are crushed into unconsciousness by the mass of repetition.

The cultural critic takes the elementary structures of everyday life, simple hand-object loops like sewing, and recovers from them deep histories

and the trace of history, the repeated action sequences which are typical for a society and which embody its deep cognitive programming.

The cultural critic is not lost in abstraction but sees in the fabric of everyday life conscious decisions buried by time and which can become the fabric of a truly radical intellectual activity.

For the cultural critic everything can be replayed, the past is not frozen. Where the phonetics of the language spoken in England could be Frisian rather than Anglian, where every temporal series is virtual and can be replayed by a set of transforms just as much as they are stored in categories and symbolic sets.

For this person the idealised Bavarian village running round the bottom of the glass from which you drink your Erdinger is as significant as the rent levels in the block opposite the pub.

For the cultural critic there is no discontinuity between the processes of radical philosophy and the crises of everyday life, of sexual choice, of being rejected, of afternoon shopping, of subjective freedom and anxiety.

The cultural critic can deal with the utterances of politicians and business satraps as effortlessly as with Danish avant-garde poets, and put up a good fight with Treasury experts.

For the cultural critic Blake's poetry and speculative thought are two forms of the same thing; for them the accepted history of society is the transcript of a speculative fantasy on the lines of Blake's; for them both the future and the past are the result of speculations, for whom the fitting of parts into a pattern is as real as putting clay into a mould to bake bricks.

For the cultural critic writing directly onto an object, say a flint nodule, is like thinking within the restrictions of a mathematical thesis whose known axioms produce unforeseen properties; and every mathematical theorem can be viewed as a three-dimensional object, in the object park; and a poem is like a collection of objects.

The cultural critic looks for a basic thermodynamic plausibility as the test of every hypothesis.

The cultural critic is devoted to improvisation – and has a vast stock of completed improvisations as a lexicon of esoteric forms.

For the cultural critic the design of appliances like electricity substations and personal computers is the product of serial intellectual, economic, and aesthetic acts. Which are subject to intellectual critique or admiration as much as the design of an estate.

For the cultural critic the poem is not pulled painfully from memory but drawn from a matrix of ideas which respond to intelligence and answer intellectual questions. It is the theory of itself.

The cultural critic lives in a liminal ground where intense limited stimulus fields allow a basis for concentration, and this allows the Utopian grounds to be seen palpably & resisting attacks; they are around us and we are in them. Where the symbolic descends into wrought physical objects and works them again.

The cultural critic lives on montage and can write texts with a thousand splices from 200 sources that produce a result unrecognisable as any of the source texts – a dimension faster, faster by an order of magnitude.

The cultural critic thrives on the cults of a thousand elective ancestors whose trajectory inspires and amazes.

Sigh. That's so wonderful. We are allowed to ask if any flesh and blood person actually lives up to that. The intellectual is deeply annoying. It's not enough to be right. That language of criticism and clarity and insistence is the sound of authority. You can't just use the language of the dominant the entire time or you will be as unpopular as politicians. As soon as you say *me anthropologist – you native* the bond of sympathy vanishes. But it is all about truth – once it's true it's irrelevant that it irritates you.

One of Adorno's essays was presented as a talk at a 1958 *Kulturkritikerkongress*, a congress of cultural critics. Needless to say, Adorno wrote an essay where he criticised the idea of cultural criticism.

THE STANDARD POEM 1960-97

This period is short enough for one abiding poem-type to be described as its typical output. I have a 'site-type' which exhibits the kind of poetry I am talking about – a volume called *Poetry Dimension 2*, from 1974, which

only includes one kind of poetry. The density of the poetry-writing group allowed a standard poem to last for 30 years, whatever out-groups were breaking out a few miles away. At one level this stability is a source of great frustration for people living through the period. It wasn't such a great commodity in the first place. At another level, this is where people of the time were – you have to go there to find them – and its persistence must indicate that somebody liked it.

In about 2005, my co-editor at *Angel Exhaust* described a first book he was reviewing by a young poet as being made up entirely of rewrites of well-known poems by poets of the day. They were from different poets, they were up to date, but each poem had an identifiable model, its surprise was something remembered. He wrote a really nice review of this not very bright poet, not mentioning the derivation of the ideas. I was impressed by his knowledge of the mainstream, he'd actually read all that junk. One function of the literary centre is to offer standard poems that will serve as models for most amateur poems. This is a public service, reassuring people that they are writing in the correct way. The lack of originality is vital to this function. Anxiety is always part of cultural attainment, and conformity is close to comfort. It may be that most poems written in 1969 (let's say) were realisations of standard models which people had seen in poetry magazines or in prize-winning books. I don't think we can list all the poem types of the era, but we can set out with two vulnerable poets, they're called Bill and Betty, they met at Oxford and graduated in 1959, married in 1960, and won second and first places in the Allott-Shallott Prize in 1961. Their friends reassured them that what they were doing was right. By writing in a validated and regulated way they were able to say, at every point, *Look, I've won the poem*. It would be churlish to dispute this verdict. Bill and Betty spent 40 years writing approvable poems. They won Allott-Shallott prizes again in 2001. It was like a friend of theirs who in 1956 bought a set of those excessively long wooden salad-servers, which were only ever used for serving salad and were a way of drawing attention to the flow of consumer goods, that new thing in the later 1950s when austerity was over, so that fresh vegetables were on sale and you could buy essentially unnecessary things. *Look, I've won the salad*. And lo, it was so. They had won the salad and their poetic gestures were approved by other people like them. And yet...

We spoke of a standard poem, and the poem was notably:

Unhedonistic. Lack of interest in style and structure can be seen as a dislike of play and so as part of this joylessness.

Anti-rhetorical. Rhetoric is felt to block empirical knowledge. There is an unconscious idea of reaching absolute truth by reducing language to one dimension, the strength of one cognitive faculty, something quite literal. Limits affecting cognition. The poetry is notably plain and similar to prose. An alternative means for the expression of emotion and emphasis has not been found.

Offers someone as central identification figure and makes a promise of reality. This means that the conventions of society are the cellular substance of the poem. The poem feels like natural language and unmodified social experience. The central figure is a Christian academic, a member of the professional classes. (Not being Christian or academic would be a revolt.) The poem offers the sound of a voice as an element of comfort; the continuity of the voice is what defines the poem as finished.

Brief. The poem fits into a slot in magazines which has a preset extent. It deals with a single incident or moment of insight, normally, to match this size limit. There is also a cognitive rhythm which is just right for picking up the information set out in such a poem. This is a boundary and poems which ignore it are *in breach*.

Respects boundaries. Linguistic tact means social tact which turns out to mean deep respect for property boundaries. However education offers a way up.

Unimaginative. The poem poses a writer in a situation which as it is not otherwise specified lapses back into the rules of conduct of twentieth-century England. Abdicating the ideas level means that the existing rules dominate the poem, which has less and less chance of escaping. The poem is lacking in hope. (It is only fair to add that empiricism was designed as a way of dispelling general ideas and so of a hope of getting out to a new situation.) Read in bulk, these poems are passive and defend existing values and relations.

Passes tests of moral fitness. The designated way of reading the poem is to fit its statements into a model of the writer's moral reactions and to accumulate these to form a moral diagram of the writer which would be compared with other writers in a grand test of fitness to serve. Because the poet selects the subject of the poem, this feels like an exam where the only candidate has set all the questions. Its results become less convincing for that reason. The planned response pattern includes utterances like 'unlike the modernist writers who flirted with

totalitarianism, Bill shows an exquisite interest in ordinary people and yet is morally restrained enough to dislike them.’ This kind of thing is not pleasurable to read but at least you know what you’re supposed to do. The poet is invested in a role of social control, and other people generally appear in order to be judged.

Empirical. The poet strives for concrete details and to notice things. This focus on external detail is concomitant with an inability to write about ideas or emotions. The senses are felt to be the messengers of everything which is true and reliable.

Easy to assimilate. The poems are compatible with each other in shared contexts like anthologies or magazines. Once you have read 100 of them reading more is remarkably easy.

This poetry has almost all the virtues of prose and almost none of the virtues of poetry.

Two more comments. First, disenchantment. A preferred subject is the loss of religion, of collective feeling, of belief in an artist or political idea. The mass of reviews of poetry in the respectable magazines very rarely give it a grade higher than gamma+. The judicious and cold attitude of academics towards heated adolescents seems to have reproduced itself in poems by academics as scepticism towards art and experience. Secondly, the shift away from metre and towards the colloquial. There was an ideal of the formalist poem (as defined by Eric Homberger at pages 88-101) which the mainstream was moving away from in the early 1960s. He says in his chapter on the 1950s, ‘In poetry, we call it an age of formalism, uniform to both England and America. By formalism we mean the interposition of *technical* imperatives between the poet and “reality”.’ The new thing, from maybe 1964, was to delete all technical imperatives – creating a new banality separate *both from academic poetry and from the innovative sector*. It is important that a core feature was actually disappearing within the period – which therefore cannot be homogeneous. It is less clear that the many individuals who moved from regular verse to irregular actually changed the sound of their poetic voice while doing so. It was not a violent transition.

‘The poems display a sensuousness, a feeling for tangs, hardnesses, distances, for the muscularity of nature.’ (Anon. in the TLS, reviewing *The Fugue and Shorter Pieces*, 1960, by John Holloway). This sums up so much of the wishes of the time. I like Holloway’s poetry, but he was a Fellow of Queen’s College, Cambridge, not a sailor or shepherd. This sensuous bias was the predilection of a group who were working mainly as teachers

or critics and scholars, their profession did not involve objects at all. The sensuous thing seems inherently a wish or denial, and surely writing poetry of ideas would have been more attainable. The rubric of the volume (*Poetry Dimension 2*) as best poems of the year reminds us of another thing – the need to keep producing. There was a community of the poem and they would have been in disarray if the flow of poems had stopped. This supply could though be like a works canteen where you eat every day – but don't much like the food. It is *The Daily Pittance*.

Many of the poems could be described as written to fulfil remarks made in reviews in the *TLS*, *Poetry Review*, or *Critical Quarterly*. Those reviews form a coherent mass. The solidarity between reviewers, poets, and readers was very high. Unfortunately, the implication of this interpenetration was that when new poetry came to be written there would be a fierce struggle for it to get published and reviewed. Internalising one set of verbal patterns defined other patterns as Wrong and Impossible and not fit to publish. The effect of doing art together is to become homogeneous and surely that leads to being tedious. I can claim to be suffering from Post-tedium traumatic apathy disorder, a condition in which extreme boredom leads to a prolonged inability to react to stimuli. There is such a thing as loss of empathy through boredom. Empathy generally improves with age but experience of terribly tedious poetry turns it off and leaves you disastrously unable to navigate through a world filled with other people.

The mid-century decline had some connection with long-term developments within the core of Oxford literati and their shared norms. The data suggest that the 1920s generation at Oxford were awesomely talented and that the mid century decline of English poetry was inseparable from the weakness of their successors, which was due to a literary investment in models (W.H. Auden, John Betjeman) which didn't work out. The issues were to do with the detailed conventions for writing a poem and also for reading and approving it. The decay of the models may have had to do with the decline of the Anglican Church and with a withdrawal from modernism and early commitments. The dip was resolved by an adaptation of these models (which actually preserved some of their essential features), presumably during the 1980s and 1990s. The sense of superiority and urgent grand destiny felt by the Underground was only sustainable up till then, while conventional writers and commentators were suffering from this debilitating shortage of creativity. I suspect that both the mainstream and the Underground positions have collapsed, and that young poets now are faced by a strange and unexplained situation.