

The Long 1950s

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**Shearsman titles*

The Long 1950s

*Morality and fantasy
as stakes in the poetic game*

Andrew Duncan

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Introduction

The present work deals with a complex of issues, but started with the double twist, that two '50s poets, Christopher Logue and Geoffrey Hill, have dominated the artistic scene over the last ten to fifteen years (or, say 1996 to 2010) and that the death of the main '50s style has liberated the official English poetry, with the decease of certain inhibitions which were glued together and brewed up to weapons grade quality back in the 1950s.

Going back to the 1950s was also a way of recovering innocence, a time of more placid belief in poetry and in the value of education. This has always been symbolised for me by the association of marine watercolourists, whose exhibitions were held next to the Institute of Contemporary Arts and which I used to pass on the way to some modern-style event. I loved the idea that people were still painting perfectly precise pictures of ships. I wanted to write about *affirmative culture*. This is my venture into these intact worlds of the non-modern, although after some experiments I have stuck with poets of exceptional quality; there is a further step, beckoning, of looking at the vast lands of amateur poetry, offering potent difficulties of address.

Amateur calculations led me, a few weeks ago, to the suspicion that as many as 7,000 poets published volumes during the period of my interest, *viz.* 1960–97. Clearly the watchword for my endeavours as historian was incompleteness. This led me to wonder if I could start from the other side and cover the unknown poets in some way, leaving out the well-known ones.

A large number of people were writing poetry without any affinity with the academic base of EngLit and its professional orthodoxy. We can call the amateurs substream, or *s-stream*, and so pose the question: is the history of the mainstream the history of the substream? That is, if we write about a few dozen prominent poets, are we also writing down the history of the whole crowd of people writing poems? I think the answer is that there are many more styles in the substream, which is simply incapable of self-censorship, and the m-stream is bound to High Street commerce and so to fashion, so that it jettisons styles quickly and imitates cleverly. We all wonder if public poets are actually better than amateur poets, or if they get picked up by calculating editors because they are photogenic,

because they have the right biography, because they are compliant enough to write what editors tell them, etc.

We are recovering the history of whole areas usually ignored by connoisseurs of poetry. The prerequisites for me taking part in it were partly the expiry of previous passions, all too intense. *Indifference* is the prelude to a wider understanding. Partly, too, the discovery of extents of poetry unknown to me. The present work is a draft history of the mainstream, although only of a few strands in a vast complex of texts.

Part of the Sixties intellectual Left sensibility was a wish to scrap the author as individual. One of the more successful paths towards this was to study genre—a system which went much deeper than individual experience and which structured the creativity of individuals, showing shifts in time which were not conscious and which could be seen as symbolic machines—impersonal programs running in the literary realm. Apparently, anyway. So the study of genre was the object of a classic essay by Hans Robert Jauss and offers us a way of dealing with poetry as a mass event. (The project is *also* to write a book without mentioning the left-modernist Underground.)

The second watchword was typification—a mass of several thousand poems would yield only some which can be attached to a genre without too much classification compromise. The genres I offer do not cover the whole ground, and they relate to real poems only as types, schemas. They have the advantage of clarity in a terrain darkened by an excess of information. I reserve the right to talk about brilliant individuals who have used genres—a literary critic is unwilling to get away from those.

The attempt to find changes in stable conventions is difficult. Securing shared space requires the attempt to create a shared vocabulary which captures the meaningful units of modern poetry and makes discussion possible even if we disagree after our discussion. Jauss deals with many genres, at one point listing “the *exemplum*, the *fabliau*, the legend, the miracle, the *lai*, the *vida*, the *nova*, love-casuistry, oriental narrative literature, Apuleius and Milanese love-stories, local Florentine histories and anecdotes” (as sources of Boccaccio), an astonishing wealth of conventions. The stability of magnetically charged clusters, as deposits and sites of recursion, may be more necessary to oral cultures than to literate ones. Everyone agrees that the genre system has collapsed in the 20th Century—along with the class system and other

organised conventions. There is a lack of names for the kinds of modern poem, and it is possible that their variety is much greater than in the 14th century. Both poets and readers set a high price on originality. So maybe genre is a set of limits and failures—lines where energy runs out rather than the features of success. The limits around the poem can be seen as simply inhibitions, and certainly we are glad when they are moved. It doesn't seem that marketing poems is like marketing Westerns. I dragged on Genre as something that was not property, but there is still the possibility that dominant individuals who occupy these temporary identities can leave them changed—that the way the game is played might therefore be different in 1980 from what it was in 1960.

I discuss domestic anecdote, the Pop poem, the academic poem, the communalist poem, the Oxford Line, the late Christian poem, the poem of star culture and high glamour. Other genres like the avant-garde, the myth poem, the New Age poem, have been covered in other works of mine. I use the terms m-stream (for mainstream) and u-stream (for the Underground) to speed things up. (M-stream possibly comes from the phrase “central current” in the introduction to the 1963 anthology *New Lines* 2.) There is also substream (the sub-literary) and the J-stream (Jungian poetry). For more exact definitions of these terms the whole of my work is relevant.

The advent of postmodernism came through what Lyotard defined as the collapse of the *grands récits*, the grand narratives. The arrival of *petits récits* is accompanied by the spread of indifference to moral considerations in art. However, within poetry the migration towards *petits récits* was very closely linked to a focus on the concrete situation and on the individual, and the purpose of this was, massively, to make moral relations clearer and to avoid the vagueness of splendid theological language. Human freedom and choice take place on the small scale. This puzzling fact conceals the possibility that the new small scale will bring the return of moral considerations to the centre of poetry.

Anxieties and Lures

Spectral investments and revisionist muzzle-flash
Anthology of 20th Century British and Irish poetry,
ed. Keith Tuma (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)
941pp.; 137 poets)

The new book shows a fairly thorough wipe of both Yeats' (1936) and Larkin's (1973) view of the landscape. No-one would claim objectivity for either of these previous Oxford anthologies or for Enright's *Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse* (1945–80). Both those recent anthologists were Movement poets, and it is widely said in print nowadays that the Movement was a gang of not very talented people who were expert in publicity and politics and brutal in their attitude to outsiders. The popularity of such accounts does not quite amount to proof that recent anthologists—Sean O'Brien, Jo Shapcott, Neil Astley, Robert Crawford with Simon Armitage—are less prone to selectivity, self-interest, and corruption. My colleague Richard Price has said that “anthologies are [...] always personal”—somewhat underrating the defensive/connective work of pleasing patrons, hitting the market, and avoiding criticism.

Clearly such a broad-spectrum anthology does not have the reach or comprehensiveness of more specific works like *Conductors*, *Floating Capital*, or *A Various Art*. The course steered here is halfway between *The Democratic Voice* and *Conductors of Chaos*. Because I have checklists lying around as part of a private project, I was able to count that 51 poets I consider significant are in the anthology and 104 are not. But really, what does this mean? I could not say I was happy with Tuma's choice, but no true quantity is here to be measured. My list is full of poets who wrote very little I like (e.g. Ruth Pitter), or who, like Betjeman, are important but wrote not one poem I enjoy. In general, counting a few column inches in an anthology makes you quarrelsome, and makes pleasure impossible, whereas worrying about a few syllables, or one syllable, makes pleasure possible (if not inevitable). Small-scale space works in this odd way. I am not certain this book is too short. I am sure it would be revolutionary if it were to reach the bookshelves of all municipal libraries, secondary schools, High Street shops, etc., because it is a momentous break with the official propaganda of Movement critics, Bloodaxe Books, *Poetry Please*, *PN Review*, Peter Forbes,

Michael Horovitz, etc. But it threatens too many investments of those who would give it publicity. I feel that the view here offered of poets emerging in the last 20 years [*written 2001*] is quite implausible, and already seems to have collapsed. This is a difficult area. Sean O'Brien (agreeing with me, so far) did a spectacularly nasty review (in *Poetry Review*) because Tuma hadn't included his favoured raft of larkinesque northerners (or followed his anthology, *The Firebox*; or secured a short stock of Sean poems). O'Brien is easily upset, because he would like to be intelligent, Auden, and left-wing, and is by daylight blunt-nosed and conservative. How many other people think that British poetry has *declined* since 1960, and the high-point is represented by Larkin? Far better to ignore the vagaries of choice and look at the whole hundred, the polycyclic centurial curve.

At the outset, we would expect good language to follow from basic rules of benignity and attentiveness. If you want to enjoy such a verbal kind of experience, you need to cultivate the virtues of a listener. The act of feeling bored can be interpreted as aggression—a rejection of someone's demand for your neurological resources. Fortunately, no one seems to insist on the virtue of reading Cecil Day Lewis—it's OK to feel bored and to avoid what induces boredom. Just as a critic who is bored too easily is called supercilious and arrogant, so also a poet who masters the primary function of seizing attention may lack virtue; we only wish for screaming and banging on dustbin lids if there is a secondary load, of complex information, to occupy our attention once it has been seized. Conversely, we may feel that the poet who acquires the socially admired, Anglican virtues of self-effacing presentation, careful control of urges and desires, loses touch with the primary artistic drive, and produces poetry which is civilised but tedious. The social office of poet tends, thus, to be awarded to someone who cannot write good poems (Robert Bridges and Andrew Motion being candidates here).

Also at the outset, we may think that good poetry is a by-product of exciting social scenes with crackling emotional exchanges. Hence a line which is moving on—not “formal progress” but the nervous instability of human energies. Topics become “significant” because of the group attention which charges them up, eyes tracking the light of flying objects.

Since language is a secondary medium, it can accommodate any kind of experience; the poems here are not linked primarily to each other, and we need to think about what the poem is about in order to make headway with it. To go beyond the personal, poetry likes to use shared symbolic sites—supra-local, sublime, but also *familiar*. These sites, composed of stored associational chains, retain what is dumped at them. The 1880s saw a rise in interest in “national myth”, and a player on the field of such myth was the government—still by proxy, since it was the mass media (appealing to the newly literate mass audience) which were pouring out a wave of imperialism. Kipling had a vision of the national cause which saw multiple dangers for England’s little ship and called for constant shifts of course. The newspapers brought “national” issues into local communities and made it easy to identify friends of the nation and their ideological duties. A cigarette card series of the 1890s, *Picturesque Peoples of the Empire*, sums up the new data flow: aimed at a mass audience, attractive and highly coloured, brilliantly stylised (and desperately fragile as soon you look more closely), imperialist, recruiting the exotic in the cause of commerce, solidly based in real information. Poets who tried to argue about politics were inevitably drawn into doing “sociological sketches”—Auden’s 30s poems can usefully be compared to these cigarette cards.

Just before the (chronological) outset of the century, was the startling arrival of Kipling, Housman, and Hardy, preoccupied with poor people as protagonists, with practical subjects and urgent material need, with low life and plain language. Even before Kipling, “sordid” and urban poetry was being written by W.E. Henley (the original for Long John Silver, allegedly), a Tory imperialist, preoccupied with heroism—and quoted by Tim McVeigh *in extremis*. The Noughts saw the emergence of poets like Sturge Moore, Wilfred Gibson, Walter de la Mare, John Masefield, Anna Wickham, Charlotte Mew. There was a split between the “peasant” strand and a Parnassian, elaborate version of poetry, dreamily open to all phases of European culture. Sturge Moore and William Watson were writing such poetry. Irving’s production of *Faust* (originally 1885) gave a concrete image of the ego being shown all times and all countries. This wonderful access also brought awareness of the decay built into all institutions. This privileged spatial figure, often referred to with words such as *pageant*, *panorama*, or *cavalcade*,

was also realised as universal exhibitions; in compact form as the Albert Memorial, with its checklist of subject races and climates; and, possibly, in the new gallery shops, with all their glass.

The view “from above” seems to open onto what Victor Turner describes as a liminal space, lifted above the ego and social oppositions. The disconnection of touch stimuli or near-by objects produces a boundless feeling. The more you abolish the egocentric perspective, the more blurred and flat the view seems. Where identification produces a spectral investment (locked on a bandwidth), the liminal integrates the whole spectrum. The liminal viewpoint relates to a personal standpoint as an object relates to a plane. Most of the poets I have examined wish for the liminal at some stage—at great risk of reaching the banal sublime. Great poetry shows a power of movement between the visible and the invisible. The gap or *diastema* between the temporal and the sublime is a moving line, and indications are that it was destabilised around 1900. The Nonconformists refused to accept the gap and wanted to bring about the Kingdom; they were vehemently emotional (which is why the literary world equates “emotional” with “low”) and often excluded from public life (“particular”). The focus on social reform, the Welfare State, argued about quantitatively through statistics, threatened to efface the diastema going the other way, and abolish the transcendental (except as the minutes of the Poor Law Commission). Because the becoming-human of Christ is the classic moment where temporal and transcendental meet, it is significant that a new theology of the incarnation and atonement developed at this time, wrapped up in a new explanation of the relationship between scientific, sensory knowledge and the Revelation. It is associated with the word *kenosis* (“emptying”), and the name of Charles Gore—who is also given credit for moving the Anglican Church from the Tory party to Labour.

There is a special relationship between poetry, songs, and advertisements. All are lyrical, hedonistic, irrational, enthusiastic, and individualist. All have given up the “objective” function of language, their information is oriented towards sympathy and so to a (virtual) “personal” relationship—a shared fantasy. The expression of personal choice is most often seen in purchase decisions. Because the culture around it is based on possessive individualism, it is conventional for poetry to pursue individual expression, for example through a

personal style. Since there is (apparently) a cultural imperative whereby art expresses possibilities denied during workaday experience, and transcends individual self-aggrandizement, poetry is also pushed towards the egoless and collective as the place where the Sublime is found. This has meant an intimate and vexed relationship between poetry and the collective imagery, which is highly stylised and coded, recognisable to all, and controlled by “central issue agencies”. Making statements about the “spiritual” and the “communal” without signing a deal with the Established Church and the political parties has not proved easy.

The song side of poetry can be divided into relationships with hymns and with popular song. The problems of the latter would shed light on the parallel problems of lyric poets: we have virtually lost English song culture of before 1960. We can, provisionally, consider a poem in terms of its *offsets* from the universal and “banal” topoi of the common song patterns: selfless, generalised, and moralising in the case of hymns, individualised, hedonistic, and insouciant in the case of pop songs. When nervous tension fails, the poem simply *flops* back onto these worn models.

The 1910s saw the emergence of poets like Edith Sitwell, Gordon Bottomley, Lascelles Abercrombie, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Siegfried Sassoon, Harold Monro, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Walter James Turner, Richard Aldington. The Georgians have had their revisionist moment (in Robert Ross’s classic *The Georgian Revolt*). According to the historian Robert Ensor, the arrival after the 1870s of a new group of secondary schools not teaching Classics produced a new wave of literate pupils with no attachment to Latin & Greek models and was the basis for the return of English speech rhythms. It seems that accentual meter came first, and was followed by free verse. One of the striking features of the 20th century is the disappearance of drama and narrative as the most popular genres of poetry. The reduction to the individual as site, and to states of mind as subject, goes right across the literary spectrum. The Georgians simplified the poem as part of an attempt to become ordinary—part of a political urge towards socialism, a social urge towards blurring “educated” status. The “stellar perspective”, its power/knowledge, is replaced by a walking perspective—vulnerable yet exploratory. This was the first kenosis of

the new century, the first abandonment of knowledge in order to make present experience more vivid. Free verse was linked with this belief in walking, and with the abolition of a certain, Classical, sublime.

The War saw the entry of the government into the propaganda business, or alternatively the entry of hundreds of literati into government service. If Kipling and Newbolt wrote for young male readers, it was because there was a mass war coming along, and this *pedagogic process with lethal outcome* had to culminate before its outcome. Newbolt was effectively made head of propaganda policy, as chief of a committee. The functional link between government and the newspapers was forged, with Northcliffe and Beaverbrook taking up government posts.

Because speech has much to do with the signalling of status, poets are very concerned about class as a subject. However, reading poetry does not necessarily have to do with the reception of status. (There is a distinction between class politics and status politics.) Class awareness has a lot to do with housing patterns, and so its rules are specific to communities, not existing anywhere at national level. Of course “single class streets”, or estates, cause polarisation, which damages cultural discourse. Detailed tracing of shifts in class relations during the century helps to pass the time, but does not amount to an explanation of the poem as a complex of information. What is palpable about “class” is strain and anxiety before speaking, before writing the poem. Imagined rejection is captioned as “you hate me because I’m middle class”, or “you don’t think my awareness is significant (because I’m not educated)”. Poetic anxiety takes a million forms; it is the *doppelgänger* of insight.

The decisive event of the 1920s was the reaction against invested social authority, which had burnt up its reserves in promoting super-patriotism. A sense of confident irresponsibility produced wonderfully light and experimental poetry. This reaction was divisive and spread around the country at uneven rates. Graves records that everyone he knew in the Army in France thought, in 1918, that there would be a revolution when they came home. The old system was rotten, there was no saving it. The new electoral act of 1918 multiplied the number of voters by four—a dangerous experiment with democracy which was followed by 20 years of Conservative dominance. However, in poetry (a fairly small and autonomous area), Newbolt and the whole genre

of naval-patriotic-historical poems came to seem ridiculous. A split between advanced and conventional taste now emerged; it is hard to decide whether this was the “Victorian—anti-Victorian” split based on revolt, or the “university taste—old middle-class taste” split.

In the 1920s, poets like Sacheverell Sitwell, Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Graves, Edgell Rickword, and Edwin Muir emerged into the light of day. Sydney Bolt’s *Poetry of the 1920s* is a successful capture of the decade and of its exoticism. The period 1926–28 saw a remarkable number of the century’s best-selling poetry books. *Collected Poems* by John Masefield, *The Testament of Beauty*, by Robert Bridges, *The Land*, by Vita Sackville-West. The lack of resemblance between these suggests that there is no abiding “structure” of the market, but rather a series of excitations, unrelated to each other, which are self-reinforcing but also pass a cusp after which their size makes them unsustainable. The duration and rhythm of such excitations are of great interest. We can guess at a preference for long forms—short poems are less likely to induce the shopper to part with money. The reader wants to be immersed—and does not wish to experience distantiation. Heaven knows what proportion of turnover attaches to the “modern style”—very low, I imagine. The Empire Exhibition of 1925 (with a “programme”, a “concept”, by Kipling) was no doubt closer to the “actually existing middle class” than ‘The Waste Land’. The twenties style was “fashionable but unpopular”, and was forgotten in the new, depressed, decade.

English Literature degree courses were now being set up. The Practical Criticism method conveyed a taste for the Metaphysicals, and for paradox. When I look at European poetry, one of the basic contrasts with English poetry is the lack of paradoxes. These can be equated with sarcasm, as a feature of English speech. The package of the New Criticism was complicated and permissive. Because of its institutional investment, it represents one of the few points of continuity in taste. As a package, it is also part of the typical differences between educated and uneducated poets—visible in the small-scale texture of poems. The Anglican taste for 17th century language was highly compatible with the Metaphysical taste—but obviously not all New Critics are Anglicans. Prac Crit is a key classroom practice, but now has to compete with others, such as the “imaginative” creative writing approach associated

with Holbrook. The ideology as packaged and distributed was a lot cruder than the “central” original; for example, the new critics clearly stated that myth was the highest form of poetry, but in the classroom “trained critics” came out firmly against myth, and poets who liked myth were identified as “loose” and “unacceptable”.

The sublime panorama manner derives from the Temptation of Christ via *Faust*. The doctrine of suffering man is probably what led to the loss of the narrative quality which Kipling or Masfield excelled at. The human in jeopardy is now allowed to stay there—an existential plight containing the poem. The egocentric quality of modern poetry is probably related to the christological partiality of Anglican theologians. The displacing of the boundary between the spiritual and the temporal naturally affected the pacing of the book of poems. A sociological concern with stable (statistically large) structures (with fluctuations cancelled out) cancels out the movement of narrative—which resided in fluctuations. The urge to be “typical” is the universality of the Redeemer’s mission at one remove. So we have the reduction into banality and finitude but without the element of excitement and reversals of fortune. We can speak of the structure-revealing or *struידical* tenor of the poem—shedding “local” detail to be solemnly, generally, valid. Myth without narrative. The kenosis of *subjectivity* was for poetry much as the loss of the congregation was for the Anglican church.

Newbolt was writing two volumes of the official naval history of the war. He was thus handed virtually the *Palladia regni*—the supreme envy objects. He had the real possession of what *The Orators* plays with the fantasy possession of. Newbolt’s national epic had obvious links to the Right (at least, to spending on dreadnoughts rather than social welfare), although social knowledge was seen as a Left agenda; just as documentary film is seen as Left but was founded by Stephen Tallents at the Empire Marketing Board—an imperialist propaganda shop. Myth or documentary?

The Navy ran on Persian oil, the Empire’s blood circulated through the canal at Suez. The expansion of Italy in the Mediterranean, her aggressively anti-British propaganda to the Arabs, and the deep-seated problems of co-operating (or suborning?) Dominion governments at a time of shocks for the world trade system, permitted Stephen Tallents to revive the propaganda structures mothballed after the Great War. His

pamphlet, *The Projection of England* (1932), with a snappy cover design by the modernist graphic designer McKnight Kauffer, set out the basic iconographic programme for promoting Britain. Reconstruction using certain anomalies in the published accounts (and this certainly isn't in the official records) would "out" him as the chief of ideology for His Majesty's Government. This would include, for example, managing cultural exports to the Empire and vetting BBC scripts for concordance with Foreign Office views. The willingness of British poets to dissent from the *theatre of patriotism* has always been rather faltering and easily fatigued. The permeation of the public realm by images of the idealised Britain developed in government commissions swept away or buoyed up poets, who wanted to use basically the same imagery and could not detain the inculcated chains of association from their sequence. He projected England, and so it was discovered. *I thought it was a mirage but it was a collective representation.*

It's curious that one of the people most drawn to modernism was Stephen Tallents. He makes it quite clear how much more impressive he found Modernist entries at international exhibitions than English entries and their vein of historicism, rurality, and domestic comfort. He made Soviet films the explicit model for the new British documentary movement, set up under his tutelage.

The Thirties saw the emergence of poets like Joseph Macleod, Hugh Sykes Davies, W.H. Auden, William Empson, Charles Madge, George Barker, John Betjeman, David Jones, Ruth Pitter, Dylan Thomas, Ronald Bottrall, Idris Davies. As modern warfare relied increasingly on the morale and education of the civilian population, the envy-formation came to be "knowing how the country really is". This was an unsuitable object of contention—because you can write great poetry without it and because the character of a good witness requires you to surrender subjectivity. The struggle for expertise remained a major distraction. The shift from "fact" to "critique of acts of knowledge", signalled by Macleod's *Script from Norway*, where the diegesis is quite literally about how to fit the shots together, moved the action to epistemology — quite palpably with Prynne, Crozier, and Denise Riley. In Auden and MacNeice (partly also with Macleod), we find endless scene-setting for a drama of ideas which never starts. Finally, with *White Stones*, we get the drama of ideas.

After forty years? Backpacking through the deserted wastes of numerous anthologies forced me to posit a “mid century malaise”, a cultural sterility reaching from 1930 to 1960. The “modernist salvation thesis” can perhaps be re-cast as a fantasy reaction to this weariness rather than as a real poetological programme or a proper thesis about history. Auden’s *Poems*, of 1930, can be picked as the start of this malaise. Mottram’s belief that there was a Poetry Revival starting in 1960 clashes with the belief of American nationalists that the malaise has lasted until the present day. It is very difficult for me to get interested by the most favoured products of the mid-century; recently I re-read Kenneth Allott’s *Contemporary Verse* and felt bewildered and uninvolved—as I had done in 1973, first reading it. I don’t think we need to explain it too much, since the poetic creativity of the period since 1960 is more urgent. However, reading biographical material of the period suggests material problems of the intellectual stratum (bringing pessimism and exhaustion), combined with an uncertainty about their role, and about the credibility of the educated classes in general. The welfare state made ease and leisure more available to the marginal educated—the dominated fraction of the dominant class, as Bourdieu calls them.

Yeats’ 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* is an authoritative statement of a school which has no books written about it, but which for all that is still active. This is a curious and personal anthology. Catchphrases like Symboliste, Theosophist, mythical, New Age, spiritual, Jungian, occult, archetypal, set the scene. It may be helpful to think of it as a semantic opposite of the “objective” new university taste based on the New Criticism, and of the “Russian Ballets” or “modernist” taste. Newbolt’s *New Paths on Helicon* is a broader-bottomed anthology, good for roughly 1900–1930.

Joseph Macleod wrote an interesting analysis of the change of mood around 1930 (in the *Festival Review*). He abandoned the style he had used for *The Ecliptic* and *Foray of Centaurs*, and began writing something more politicised and closer to the language of the people. Reading what he wrote about the style of the 1920s, a period he had just lived through, writing major poetry, casts deep doubt on the concept of “modernism” distributed to university students today. The idea that developments since 1960 follow a curve parallel to events of the 1920s, that the course of future poetry is already contained in the

events of the past, that the preconditions for artistic success today are prefigured in aesthetic frameworks discovered in the 1920s—all this is deeply implausible. I would suggest, instead, that a wave of critics avoided the task of facing past poetry within its own horizons, by setting up a test of prestige, which they had all learned, and judging the poetry, inflexibly, by that test. The whole area of shifts of taste can thus be avoided. The ambiguity of the past disappears. Doubt disappears. Recognising the in-style lets you be recognised as in by the in-group. Clearly, most poetry of the last century is not worth revisiting. The decision which poets should be revisited cannot be resolved by applying the “modernist” ideology. It is simply a way of cutting down the info load and not “throwing yourself” back into a past intellectual horizon.

The problem with utilising modernist techniques in poetry is still that they have been so thoroughly assimilated by advertising that they make the audience flash into the mental state demanded by advertising.

The 1920s were a “good” period, but the arrival of the Depression made the ’20s attitude (*ballets russes*, exoticism, neo-classicism, all those glittering toys) seem out of date, and commitment was the burning issue. Recent writers on the Thirties (Dai Smith, Valentine Cunningham) have pointed out that lack of commitment was a class quality—the privilege of the privileged. The most typical response to the crisis was to vote Baldwin, someone who stood for no response except serenity. The rise of Fascism made world-view an urgent matter for discussion. The camera now began decisively to challenge or reinforce social memory; the wish for precision came out as documentary. Charles Madge founded Mass Observation, which had a strong surrealist influence, and (rather later), wrote documentary poems.

Macleod’s least favourite person, Stephen Tallents, tied the “image of England” firmly to consumption, leisure, sport, affluence—so also to individualism and to leisure practices developed by the land-owning families. The growth of leisure and a “consumer society” has been a long process of stratified diffusion of upper-class codes to the masses. The British pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exhibition showcased this vision of leisure, traditional quality, and individualism. Cultural successes have typically been mediators of gentry culture to everyone else; Betjeman being a classic figure. A ’40s magazine like *Horizon* described the favoured days (the *très riches heures*) of Oxford aesthetes and is the

model for the colour supplements which arrived, classless but affluent, in the 1960s. The aesthetes rejected work to evolve better play and inevitably became the godfathers of the leisure culture. The new status game affected language, in which status is central, and made it possible to define poetry as an individualist practice in which style was a form of self-differentiation. By becoming privatised, in subject matter and style, the poem fulfilled Tallents' strategic conception. Britain as a product, Britain as a range of products.

The images with which politicians, advertisers, and poets depict the desirable state are essentially similar. This similarity perhaps encourages struggles for legitimacy; it means that the rival claimants to social wisdom compete on a shared pitch, with the disagreement encoded in slight modifications of the central imagery. Poets (preachers, etc....) cannot invent new primary scenes, but generally wish to combine the sublime with the personal; the switches where personal, local experience, and invariant, symbolic experience are tied together or "interleaved" are few in type, and each type is used by many different poets. They are "common carriers".

Changes in the opinions of Christian writers (and orators) are still central to an educated public still dominated by Anglicanism. The history of these changes in Anglican opinion has not been written—but if we see poetry following a curve, we can ask what drew the curve. Because Socialism lacks a morality (as also the Church lacks a theory of politics), and because poetry deals with personal relations, Christianity remained the source of models for poetry. A recent preoccupation with Christology and the difficult concept of kenosis probably influenced the way English poets wrote about suffering in the trenches. It is hardly coincidental that a new dogma which emphasized the suffering and fear of Christ on the Cross, His immersion in human muscles and senses, arrived together with a public preoccupation with the health of the working classes. In the 1930s, rejection of modern war, and so of the modern state, led to personalist positions, and was probably influential on poets in their wish for "a personal stance", on politics but also on how to write. It is likely that the shifts in the way poets understand their "millimetre of distinctiveness" as a legitimation for speaking, modulating from Personalism to political protest to existentialist quest to intellectual thesis to "lifestyle statement", are the arena where the

soul of British poetry has been exposed; where the grand stakes are lying around free; where the battle is lost and won.

Magazines and the radio demanded a new light entertainment poetry to stock their shelves with—a new product brilliantly supplied by figures like Betjeman, with borrowings from popular song channelled through nurseries like the Oxford revue. Auden began by imitating Brecht and went on to imitate Betjeman. Time and print are not kind to chorus-boys. Looking at the BBC just reminded the historically minded of a whole chain of relationships in which the patron dominated the artist. The convention is that in the 20th century the artist supplies the ideological programme—whereas in the 17th century it was the patron, or a “civil servant” working for the patron, and the artist drew the figures. A cherished illusion? Figures like Newbolt, Tallents, Melvin Lasky, made the terms of employment clear, at various times, and by controlling usage made the associational paths repetitive—to internalise the message was to internalise the code. To fail to internalise it was to be a lout—someone who couldn’t hear the music.

It would be interesting to analyse styles, for once, in blocks beginning in 1905, 1965, etc., instead of “zero to nine”. Emergence is not a simple concept, and some of these cases would need some further research. What exactly constitutes emergence? And what about demergence, an event rather more common than we would like? (And could it be transitive, e.g. “Andrew Motion demerged them all one especially bad Friday night.”) The problem with a list like the one proposed here in segments is that readers immediately start to barrack you about the poets you haven’t mentioned. Aiee! A much-loved myth is that of the neglected writer, stubbornly individual, who after symbolic years in the wilderness achieves recognition. The problem with this curve is that it doesn’t make the reader the central thing in the reading experience. The myth of neglect thoroughly confuses the history of innovation—most neglected writers are perfectly conventional. It seems to help in selling books. There is a special lien between the reader and a writer they can buy shares in—a kind of debenture. The theory, rightly or wrongly, is that such a heroic Legend dramatises the reader’s path from dependency, to originality, to struggle, and to—becoming the Marquis of Carabosse, I suppose. The governing of the spectrum auction by rules like:

if you own it, I don't
if I own it, you don't

—produces something like a suburban tract of houses and gardens, each partitioned off from the others. The handling of the wilderness of the imaginary reproduces the everyday if the poet applies a suburban logic and treats other poets as competitors. The fragmentation of the market is the *realisation* of a social structure.

The organisation of an anthology by the authors of the poems invites us to organise a competition between them. Or, we may enjoy judging the relative success of poets. Starting to write a poem is never a more certain undertaking than setting out on a journey carried by Railtrack. Perhaps we do not wish to see the poems as lumps of property, as indices of performance and personal prowess, etc., but prefer an exit into a space where ego boundaries are weakened, and transcended.

Could we imagine the separate poems as a population of realisations showing the geography of a pre-existing space? We begin with uncertainty and end with morphology. We can alternatively see the period as containing a series of brilliant possibilities, which poets compete to capture—and which have nothing to do with individuals. Individualism is artistically productive—in swiftness to vary formal constants, curiosity about “inherited assumptions”, fearless debouching into unoccupied and boundless space, the fantasy of frequent replacement of the centre by a periphery. But also, I see the urge for self-aggrandizement squeezing the poetry out of the poem.

In the 1940s, we have the emergence of poets like JF Hendry, Roy Fuller, Glyn Jones, Lynette Roberts, Sorley MacLean, W.S. Graham, T.S. Law, Kathleen Raine, Roland Mathias, George Campbell Hay, Douglas Young, Sydney Goodsir Smith, F.T. Prince, Alan Ross. My colleague James Keery is undertaking a large-scale revision of traditional interpretations of this decade, of which his recent edition of the poems of Burns Singer is just the start. He is contemplating a revisionist anthology—which, no doubt, should be followed by parallel interventions for each decade since, overturning the verdicts made by partial literary journalists at the time (and apathetically followed by conformist academics). What stands out from the list above is the pre-eminence of Scotland and Wales at this time. In wartime, the closeness

of death brought out the priestly function to assure the living that grief would pass. Poets were the eschatological guards carrying out the *apocalypse*, the unveiling, as death unveiled itself. As civilisation vanished, poets evoked immortality and eternal values. Revelation “falls, like lightning, vertically from above” (Barth); is the “downrush from the superconscious” (Charles Gore). The polar ice appeared in the poetry of Graham and Hendry as a liminal substance, frozen, changeless, but carrying life. Rexroth’s 1948 *New British Poets* is the classic anthology.

In the 1950s, we have the emergence of poets like George Mackay Brown, Edwin Morgan, Iain Crichton Smith, Christopher Logue, Geoffrey Hill, Philip Larkin, Charles Tomlinson, Ted Hughes. This was a miserable decade, and it was traumatic that the culture managers it threw up controlled so much of the (tiny) poetry industry for the next 25 years. Reinfection by interpenetrative elites.

The decline of Christianity in Britain is the single unambiguous fact of the last 40 years. The Anglican Church was undergoing a defensive crisis in the ’50s (although it seemed like a revival to some people), and so the efforts of the clergy to find relevance for their message to an urban, proletarian, and increasingly secular society were firm and radical—if sometimes called desperate. The loss of significance of the established clergy prefigures the loss of the literati, including the poets, and posterity will see these processes as parts of the same thing. It is not quite clear to me, for lack of time-stamped evidence, whether poetry got into simple language, live performance in clubs, “relevance”, “protest”, the youth market, because the Church had already done that, or whether they led (in any way). The shift from Apocalypse to Movement was a shift within concerned Christianity, and the move on to Pop poetry and the “reading” was also a shift within the Christian communion. So many of the poets of the ’60s write from a virtual youth club, and cannot be understood in any other context.

James is researching the underground survival of the New Romantics (the origin of the Underground?); for me it was just a miserable decade where the Conservatives won three General Elections. The Cold War saw most European countries debating the virtues of Russian and American models for art. With the Welfare State, the Left was stepping into the shoes of the Church, as source of security and of

collective ideals, ready to undergo a parallel decline at 20 or 30 years' delay. The (poetic) failure of the Left in the 1950s is either the key to the whole decade, or a result of some other failure, still obscure. Books by Macleod and Christopher Logue are tantalising and anticipatory. For committed leftists, the surrender of artistic judgment to Party officials, who themselves lacked artistic judgment, led to portentous and wooden poetry. The sense of middle-class guilt was too disabling. So it was that Left poetry had to wait for the arrival of a generation of educated working-class students who were turned on by the idealisation of the proletariat. The exodus from the Communist Party in the wake of destalinisation and the Russian intervention in Budapest may also have cleared the air.

While the Left was shedding its addiction to Nonconformist hymn and sermon figures, the Anglican Church was positively copying Nonconformism. Endless triumphant repetition had associated sincerity with poverty of means, artistic splendour with faintness of heart; the rise of the working class meant the triumph of Nonconformism, by weight of numbers. One result was the abolition of high art, but with the mundane conquering all, instead of the sacred flooding the mundane. This pressure to fail struck a bizarre alliance with the spread of light entertainment, demanding trivial poems. This is the heritage of Forbes and Astley—the Empty Quarter. But the same situation, the same readers, could sustain a completely opposite result.

The advance out of a wartime/emergency economy, and a shift from heavy industry to light, drew on a consumer society, with the image-makers paid to direct consumption rather than make propaganda for the government. Individualist consumption scenarios called for individualist poetry. Along with the white goods came the genre of domestic anecdote. As higher education spread and spread, the expanding academic cadre of EngLit had a remarkable degree of homogeneity, which in many ways went all round the universities of the capitalist world. This consensus had staying power rather than creative energy. It was the citadel of defence for a certain approach to the poem which we can describe as disenchantment. Poets from within that citadel had as watchwords empiricism, toughness, the rejection of rhetoric, the criticism of ideology. Of course there were other stylistic preferences in the poetry world, but the disenchanted faction had remarkable impetus and retained power over opinion and central

magazines at least until the 1980s. A very high proportion of poets published, all through, wrote from inside that consensus, to be read by others inside it. This stylistic register presented itself as freedom and modernity to those inside it and as a massive array of inhibitions to anyone else. If you read 100 cultural or social histories of Britain, they will all say that the Swinging Sixties changed everything. However, the decline of poetry in the culture market is equally clear. One way of writing the modern history is to say that the lyrics of pop songs replaced poetry and that the line of musicless poetry was a province by-passed by modernity—thinly populated by pastoral clans of conservatives and malcontents. The disenchanted were more disapproving of Youth Culture (as embodied in students) more than anything else, and they simply had to stand fast in their positions, as “bourgeois guardians”, in order to survive until 1979 and the triumph of neo-conservatism. That is, key figures born around 1920–1930 fulfilled the usual length of a writer’s career rather than being crated up and delivered to the scrapyard by around 1966. One theme of this work is necessarily how the long 1950s came to an end.

At this point we break off from Tuma’s anthology, because the problem of which poets to select has become too urgent. It is easy to depict the period since 1960 in the terms classically stated by Eric Mottram, that is as the collapse of everything organic to the old social system and the old middle class, and the emergence as dominant artistic formation of a wave of innovative poets who had constitutively absorbed “the lessons of modern art”, and in particular of a package of American poets flourishing in the 1950s. Tuma’s selection supports this, to a great extent. This tenet, which might seem to be just a personal matter of taste, goes beyond that because it identifies a conflict within the poetry world. Now that decades have rolled by, there has emerged a depolarisation project, where we try to grow out of the mutual hostility of the factions which lined up against each other in the ’70s. The present work is trying to discover the truth about the mainstream, as a step towards mutual understanding and respect.

There’s this dance going round like an awful disease. The “British Poetry Revival” developed such kinetic energy as to achieve an effect of shock and awe. This covered the full spectrum of cultural endeavour and drew everything from architecture to anthropology in its train. All this had a certain effect of dazzle which may have reduced clarity of

mind even while injecting a million milligrams of Theory. Too high to look down? *If I stop running I'll fall out of the sky*, as The Creation sang in yesteryear. Catalogue work allowed me to make a count of "Underground" poets publishing up to 1990: 2,000 names. This was a whole world. Of these perhaps 100 were artistically significant. If there were 2,000 poets publishing in the Underground, it is futile to go into the new cultural process under a banner saying that they were all good. Surely there are excellent reasons for admitting that the slack, messy, inattentive Underground boys were inattentive, messy, and slack. This is the truth and will found a society of poetry in which we can talk to each other. The disputes were originally about theories of poetry. If there are so many bad poems, the theories responsible for them must be wrong, and there is no point going to war for them. Perhaps there are better theories, which regrettably most poets have failed to understand. The theories we abandon on the way to the truth probably weren't going to be very good paths to follow into a joyful future. Being delusions moves them out of the frame for shining paths. The lie seems to be inclusive but all the falsity it entails means that the shared thing crumbles at every step. So it's better to tell the truth.

A community has been defined as a group of people who share a version of the past (or, share a past preserved in narratives). In order to build a larger poetic community, we go through a process of filtering which builds an ever larger stock of truth. To investigate the Underground poets was a mammoth critical undertaking which filled my horizon for a great portion of my life. However, reaching that horizon revealed another landscape, new extents of cultural and linguistic space. This raises a number of questions.

- Q1 What did the Sixties and Seventies achieve, if not to make us all so hip it hurt? Could the reversals of traditional perspective be repeated and still work? could this happen twice? What is the Underground now *for*?
- Q2 Has historicism played out its hand? is modernism still striking out into the unknown, 100 years after the first Modernist wave in Europe and fifty years after the start of the "British Poetry Revival"? What style does the time recommend, or does the Time have an organ which shapes style? Has the obsolete ceased to be obsolete?

- Q3 Has the refusal to innovate worked as classicism, that is something which is timeless rather than tedious and used up?
- Q4 In the 1950s, an established poetic style was identified with the middle class in power. Has the mainstream or the middle class evolved since? Is there a new middle class? What changes have occurred within the mainstream?
- Q5 Has the BPR evolved since 1977 or become a genre? has innovation continued to be innovation or become a range of recognisable and beloved moves?
- Q6 Far from the tier of cynical/urban literati, is there a world of poets, provincial, innocent, untouched by fashion? are they productive?
- Q7 Is there an “innovation wave B” following the maximum polarisation of the 1970s, which has been accepted by the mainstream without sinking back into the conventional? We could call this the “suave postmodernist” vein.
- Q8 Is there a modernity, in terms of what gets through emotionally to a modern audience, which is quite different from the self-reflective “in” sound of the Underground?
- Q9 Did the box of beautiful things really get burnt?

I do not feel able to answer all these questions. I went through a project of trawling bookshops and the Net for mainstream poetry books, but a count of the total makes it clear that I only caught a drop in the ocean. It is a dubious basis for generalisation. I am not trying to take the Underground out of the Museum of Culture and dispose of it in some car-boot sale of finished experiments. Instead I am trying to reach another part of the spectrum and collect new experiences. The “truth and reconciliation” process must involve truth, and the way to this is research.

A necessary idea is that, as you shop and consume in the poetry world over decades, there is a shift from intense reaction to a classificatory recognition of surface features, which degenerates into a classificatory inertia. That is, as a dumb teenager you try lots of things and work out

what you dislike from inside it, experiencing it, but a few years later you are just recognising surface features to “recall” what you are going to like. You don’t repeat the bad experiences but you tend to converge on what you already own (and what is called your “identity”). If this (unproven) idea is true, you stand to benefit from depolarisation, there is a dividend from it. Maybe a genre is really a repetition neurosis. Of course a critic who simply charges in and tells a well-informed market of readers “your taste is wrong! your knowledge is wrong! your deeply held preferences and precious learning are just mistakes I am going to liberate you from! just wait!” is advancing into idiocy territory.

The existence of genres derives from this “classificatory nostalgia”, the wish to return to the pleasurable experience. So can the wish be a wrong decision? Or is it the voice both of self-knowledge and of connoisseurship? Is there a profession of managers whose function is to *annul my wishes*?

It is possible to disbelieve in the existence of the mainstream and the Underground and the geometry which opposes them to each other. However, the opposition is a fundamental feature of the social space in which poetry happens. There is an exact line between the two realms even if an individual poet can write on both sides of the line. This fuzziness is the nature of human behaviour, and the overlaps never amount to an erasure of the opposition. Equally, the opposition is at the level of the Gestalt and cannot be reduced to a single feature which we could quantify and count off with bureaucratic accuracy. Several other classificatory oppositions have something to offer, but this one is soaked in the energy and ideals of several generations.

People channelling Wilfred Owen or W.H. Auden are likely to show up in any store of amateur poetry. An obvious trait here is retardedness—time seems to have stopped for these people. Self-insertion occurs into a literary situation which already exists. It may be that the eminent can be visualised as the apex of a large column of literary sensibility in which hundreds of other people participate. In fact, we can conceptualise genre as being the abstraction from the concrete activity of dynamic individuals, frozen and yet diluted by the passage of time. The way in which people write poems comes out of the shared past—new poems embody a shared past. The task here is to refurbish the past by finding out which poets achieved excellence.