

The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry

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of Conservatism
in Modern British Poetry

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To the Boat People

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Introduction; or, anxiety before entering a room

No modern British poet has an international reputation. Studying the translation lists of French or German publishers, or an attempt to form an Atlas of modern world poetry, brings home the gap when Graves, Eliot, or Auden are positively the youngest of “ours” on the lists. Editors from these countries have a good command of English, and ready access to the books put out by the visible organs of culture; but they just aren’t interested.

When Australians and Americans talk about British poetry or culture, it is generally the oldness which has struck them. It is annoying, of course, for someone who feels, and is, young to be told by someone older than they are that their thoughts are old. All the same, the serene detachment from the next segment of history, as compared with the segments we have had already, can also be an indifference to your own part in it, and consequently inhibit you from writing serious and ambitious poetry; a collective hostility to innovation is also a hostility to young poets. Formal conservatism may be a symptom of anxiety and lack of a personal voice; in fact, of an inability to write naturally.

It is half a century since any British poet acquired a world-wide reputation; maybe the world is wrong, and maybe British society, or a certain subdivision of it called the culture industry, has been hostile to new poets and has crushed the life out of them; reducing them to paranoia; forcing them to do other work to make a living; forcing them to write in conventional and light modes or go unpublished. Part of this could be due to excessive love for dead writers; all, or most, British poets go through a phase of love for the past, which builds up to a trau-

matic shock of realising that they have to write contemporary verse because they themselves are a contemporary person. This is less traumatic for an Australian or American. Excessive love for the past leaves less psychological space for thinking about the future; at the worst, this makes you become a scholar, forking over the creativity of the past, and abandoning and suppressing your own creativity. Pastiche and antiquarianism are national characteristics, as well as being neuroses.

Unease and evasion are often signalled by writing about archaeology. If a British poet writes about old churches, it gives a message of faintness, exhaustion, despair almost to the point of depersonalisation. Anxiety can be signalled either by talking about yourself or by being completely unable to talk about yourself. Despite the vast and expensive machinery of cultural conservation, the Ruins Management in which most of our leading cultural figures are employees, nothing is being added to the ruins. We are separated from the tradition by a huge gulf even as we take American tourists on guided walks around it. The ruins want living people only as conservators, scrupulously performing madrigals and Jacobean plays, only as servants, solemnly reciting the words of the dead, not as creators. The inclination of world literary opinion to agree that English literature has stopped goes along with the collapse on home grounds of pre-modern English poetry (say 1900–1960), or of our relationship to it. Who can read anthologies like *British and American Poetry 1900–1950* (edited by Cecil and Tate), or *The Penguin Book of Mid-century Verse (1918–60)*, edited by Allott, or *English Poetry 1900–1940*, edited by Strong and C Day Lewis, and take them seriously? Modernity is a vague and overblown term, a terrifying ghost whose name we give to the wreckage which has engulfed so many cultural projects, or to the failure of 20th C British poetry. A basic rule of English culture is that something is more valuable the older it is; accurate observation of this rule has not enabled conservative poets to find a market, or to construct something durable from materials that have endured, perhaps, too much. Rule no.99 may have been that connoisseurship of the old is so esteemed that no-one will face humiliation by liking a contemporary fake. Unsold in some warehouse, we can perhaps find the genuinely contemporary, a string of masterpieces too volatile and transformed to reach the shops and the shoppers.

Geoffrey Hill, as a conservative, Christian, stalwart representative of the millions of working-class Tories, an academic who adores the writings of the English dead, etc., has the problem that ordinary conservative readers can't understand him. The Anglican Church is

commissioning new hymns, but not from Hill.

We can hardly consider this problem without bringing on stage one of the fundamental dreads, which we would prefer not to see: that, as laid out recently by John Ardagh, in *Ireland and the Irish*, English people (or middle-class English people?) are stand-offish, depressed, and uninterested by strangers; that this everyday rejection of new possibilities for social exchange is the basis for verbal behaviour in the “high” (and “autonomous”) zone of poetry which also fails to be excited by the new and prefers repetition; and that the unpleasantness of the new is a self-confirming anxiety, as the brilliant possibilities fly away when confronted with gloom and sloth. Failure to be enthusiastic makes us unattractive, and this experience destroys our self-confidence, so that we become ever less enthusiastic and attractive. This is not scientific sociology (although Ardagh has talked to a lot of people in Ireland, Germany, and other places), but it is part of our problem as we try to find its edges and so its shape. He also does not develop a class analysis of the “coldness”, but the minimal assumption is that it applies to all classes, as an English approach to the reefs of verbal interaction. The theory of a global English lack of enthusiasm does not fill me with enthusiasm, but there we are.

The proposal involves a virtual geometry in which there is a bounded space we call “the new”; and there is a personality structure which deals with this area; national culture teaches this personality structure what to do; and British national culture labels the new, unexplored area as an anxious place, best avoided. It is the unexplored space of closeness, where we build conversational links to other people; it is also where poetry happens, and poetry is the cultural version of this basic verbal skill of linking ourselves to strangers. The space beyond the boundary of the learnt is fragile. The proposal is that a minority of British poets have fabulous skills with the unfamiliar, the spontaneous, the improvised, the intimate, and the experimental, and so get attacked or ignored.

The overstuffed middle-class house inhibits children because it is too fragile, because they project too much onto what they already own, because they then refuse to value something that they didn't grow up with. Such children grow up with fine discrimination of different layers of the past, highly-trained memories, deep attachment to even minor aspects of the national past, and the inability to create.

Where poets derive their position from external factors like having been around for a long time, or being a friend of famous writers, or

being published by Faber, or (more subtly) commanding prestige forms of language, they have little need to achieve in poetry. The poet who prefers the old is not excited about the next poem, so largely predictable and taken care of by memory. The higher mental faculties do not light up, because they are not needed. The poem is not a great occasion, because it is not going to change anything. It has no need to impart information, since what it imparts both sides already possess. It does not involve learning, improvisation, play, searching questions, self-criticism, risk, growth. What virtues it possesses are apart from these and perhaps even incompatible with them. A culture that values everything to the extent that it is old has no need to write new poems. A less stable social order would frequently wipe out these ranks and titles and put the stress on achievement—on writing new books. The reading public is biased in favour of biography, dealing with distinguished people who were active several decades ago, and against poetry, written by marginal artists in the now-time. The literary world is filled with writers who were doing something creative thirty years ago and are now prominent for personal appearances, columns and chats, where they appear as themselves and avoid any creative effort. Banal conversation is reassuring, but can be turned on its side to be an indicator of anxiety; the anxiety is also why English people would rather not make the first move or make new friends.

If poetry is sold and publicised on the basis of what was happening thirty years ago, what is there for new poets? what do they plug into? An audience for the innovative has existed ever since the 1890s, in an awkward position vis-à-vis the middle of the road English taste. There is a history of innovation and stylistic revolt which is permanently undernourished, and overshadowed by more confident and robust operators from other countries. It is difficult for young poets to find out that it exists. The psychological tensions between being marginal, being embittered, being an elite, competing with the people who can give you access to publication, slowly becoming “the older generation of the new”, are quite fearsome and have not always maximised creativity.

The potential, and serving, audience for poetry may have an appetite for the new, but when we come to the infrastructure which publishes books and floats narratives of repute for them, it seems likely that we have both a claque which tells us, dozens or even hundreds of times a year, that something new and exciting has arrived when they are some old and weary and perfunctory things, and various generations of conservative critics in the overground magazines who so hate the

formally innovative, conjectural, culturally self-confident poetry that they refuse even to review it. If what seems to one person as new and trendy appears thirty years out of date and a weary rehash to another, there is a problem in communicating, which calls for evidence to be gathered and published. Because the grounds of tradition from which any innovations can be seen as such do not seem to be spelt out anywhere, this book is an attempt to list modern innovations, to date them and relate them to a broader Textmilieu or horizon, and to give the elements of a history of non-conservative poetry in this country.

Versions of the Chronology of Style

Because the notion of “style history” refers to a collective practice, real changes in it should have been remarked on by many critics; an eccentric view of it is wrong rather than “personal”. The pattern is complicated by the conservatism of most British poets, which would oblige their sponsors either to disguise the fact that changes were occurring around them, or to invent phony versions of change to rebadge their invested poets as “innovatory”. Accepting this conservatism, one could also define the poets who innovated as marginal and impertinent.

The search has involved full-scale treatments in books in the libraries I use. More views could be extracted from introductions to anthologies, book jackets, or reviews in magazines, but these were too difficult to marshal. Charles Tomlinson’s reviews of the British scene in *Poetry (Chicago)* around 1960 are classics, but that is to name just one set of articles.

These books are being interrogated only for their views on the evolution of poetic style, and not for anything else.

Some books about modern British poetry which have been searched for versions of style:time change

1960s

- 1-2 British Council pamphlets *Poetry Today* by Geoffrey Moore and Elizabeth Jennings (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1958 and 1961)
- 3 Morgan, Kathleen *Christian themes in contemporary poetry* (London: SCM Press, 1965)

- 4 Dodsworth, Martin, ed., *The Survival of Poetry* (London: Faber, 1970)
- 5 Alvarez, Alfred (certain essays in) *Beyond all this fiddle* (London: Penguin, 1968)
- 6 Orr, Peter, ed., *The Poet's Voice* (radio interviews with poets) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966)

1970s

- 7-8 Thwaite, Anthony, *Poetry Today* (Harlow: Longman, 3 editions, 1973-96, for the British Council); and *Twentieth Century English poetry*, 1978
- 9 Hamilton, Ian, *A Poetry Chronicle* (London: Faber, 1973)
- 10 Thurley, Geoffrey *The Ironic Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974)
- 11 Tom Raworth's theoretical text *Cancer* of circa 1971 published in 3 parts (mainly, *Logbook*; Berkeley, California: Poltroom, 1971)
- 12 Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop, eds., *British poetry since 1960* (Manchester: Carcanet 1972)
- 13 Lucie-Smith, Edward, notes in his anthology *Poetry since 1945* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970)
- 14 Mottram, Eric, catalogues to *PCL Conferences 1974 and 1977* (London: Polytechnic of Central London, 1974 and 1977)
- 15 Homberger, Eric *The art of the real* (London: Dent, 1977)
- 16 Holbrook, David *Lost bearings in English poetry* (London: Vision Press, 1977)
- 17 Fulton, Robin *Modern Scottish poetry: context and individuals* (Loanhead: MacDonald Publishers, 1974)
- 18 Seymour-Smith, Martin, a section in *Guide to Modern World Literature* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972)
- 19 Fraser, G. S. *Essays on 20th C Poets* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977)
- 20 King, P. R. *9 modern poets: a critical introduction* (London: Methuen, 1979)
- 21 Hobsbaum, Philip *Tradition and Experiment in British Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979)
- 22 Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, eds., *British poetry since 1970*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980)
- 23-24 Grigson, Geoffrey *The Contrary View* (London: Macmillan, 1974); *Blessings, Kicks, and Curses* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982)

- 25 Fisher, Roy interviews (in: *Nineteen poems and an interview* (Pensnett: Grosseteste, 1977); and *Gargoyle* 24 (periodical, Washington D.C.). The most important theoretical statements of the period. Reprinted in (51)
- 26 *Akros* 28 (periodical, Nottingham, 1975) is a survey, of Scottish poetry from 1920–74, at book length; *Akros* 29–44 then provided long surveys of many individual poets

1980s

- 27 Raine, Kathleen, *The poet's journey into the interior* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982) (and) editorials or articles in *Temenos* (periodical, London, 1981–)
- 28 Easthope, Antony *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983)
- 29 Robinson, Alan, *Instabilities in Contemporary British poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988)
- 30 Weatherhead, A Kingsley, *The British Dissonance* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 1983)
- 31 Crozier, Andrew 'Thrills and Frills' (in: Sinfield, Alan, ed., *Society and Literature 1945–70*) (London: Methuen, 1983)
- 32 Fisher, Allen *Necessary Business* (in *Spanner*, periodical, London, 1985)
- 33 Riley, Peter, interview in *Reality Studios* 5 (periodical, London, 1985)
- 34 Booth, Martin *British poetry 1964–84: Driving through the Barricades* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985)
- 35 Davie, Donald *Under Briggflatts: British Poetry 1960–88* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989)
- 36 Hooker, Jeremy *Poetry of Place* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982)
- 37 Hooker, Jeremy *The Presence of the Past* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987)
- 38 Conran, Tony *The Cost of Strangeness* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982)
- 39 Lucas, John *Modern English Poetry from Hardy to Hughes* (London: Batsford 1986)
- 40 Mole, John, *Passing judgments: poetry in the eighties: essays from Encounter* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press 1988)
- 41 Mathias, Roland, *A ride through the woods* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1985)
- 42 Middleton, Christopher *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983)

- 43 Tomlinson, Charles, essay in volume 8 of the *New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) (this is more or less identical with his essay in the previous edition, 10 years earlier)

1990s

- 44 Morgan, Edwin *Crossing the Border* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990)
- 45 Moore-Gilbert, Bart, and Seed, John, eds, *Cultural Revolution?* (1992)
Moore-Gilbert, Bart, ed., *Cultural Closure?* (1994) both include essays on poetry by Robert Sheppard (both, London: Routledge)
- 46 Allchin, Donald *Praise above all: discovering the Welsh tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991)
- 47 Riley, Denise, ed. *Poets on Writing 1970–91* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992)
- 48–50 Crawford, Robert *Devolving English literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); *Identifying Poets: Self and territory in 20th C Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); intro to Penguin anthology *The Democratic Voice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998)
- 51 Fisher, Roy *Interviews through time* (Kentisbeare: shearsman, 1998)
- 52 Acheson, James, and Huk, Romana, eds, *Modern British Poetry* (Albany N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995)
- 53 Barry, Peter, and Hampson, Robert, eds, *New British Poetries: The Scope of the possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993)
- 54 Jackaman, Rob *A study of cultural centres and margins in British Poetry since 1950. Poets and publishers.* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1995)
- 55 Clarke, Adrian (papers in) *Millennial Shades and Three Papers* (London: Writers Forum, 1998)
- 56 Tuma, Keith *Fishing by Obstinate Isles* (Evanston, Illinois: Illinois University Press, 1999)
- 57 Kennedy, David *New Relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996)
- 58 Gregson, Ian, *British Poetry and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996)
- 59 Bush, Clive, *Out of Dissent* (London: Talisman Editions, 1997)

- 60 Corcoran, Neil, *British Poetry Since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993)
- 61 Chevalier, Tracy, ed., *Contemporary Poets* (the St James Guide) (London: St James, 1992); previous editions contain some poets not included in this one; the 1970 issue was edited by Rosalie Murphy, the 1975 and 1980 issues by James Vinson, the 1985 issue by Vinson and DL Kirkpatrick. This contains essential information about the external careers of hundreds of poets, which I will not duplicate
- 62 Ludwig, Hans-Werner, and Fietz, Lothar, eds. *Poetry in the British isles: Non-metropolitan traditions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995)
- 63 Görtschacher, Wolfgang, *Little Magazine Profiles 1949–93* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1993)
- 64 *Sgleftrio ar eiriau, golygydd*/edited by John Rowlands (two of the essays are about modern poetry in Welsh) (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1992)
- 65 Sheppard, Robert, *Far Language* (Exeter: Stride, 1999)

Especially useful ones were: Chevalier; Görtschacher; Mottram; Seymour-Smith; Thurley; Conran; Homberger; Riley P; Fisher R; Akros; Lucie-Smith; Crozier.

Scraping together what these authors say about Style Time, we can identify five principal versions of it:

Theory A

In 1959–61 there was a breakout from an old, restricted style, spread through little magazines, and appealing to a new audience created by the expansion of the universities, and as this continued the new thing received a boost from the revolutionary urges of 1968 and the mass radicalisation of the succeeding years. It was severely constrained and deflected by events around 1977–9, notably a hangover of disillusion and a right-wing backlash, victorious in poetry, as not in the visual arts. Since then poetry has been split between a pop-conservative mainstream and the succession of the breakthrough, undergoing complex internal evolution in a cultural margin. Cohesion was as a group of friends, and through shared outlets, while the “style rule” was to innovate constantly, questioning everything and relying on spontaneity.

Theory B

Poetry was formerly in the hands of a little clique defined by education, residence, and loyalty (to themselves), and was restricted by this allegiance. They had a complex game called culture, which involved rhetoric and erudition. Since 1945 (or, 1960, or 1970, or 1980, or 1910, or 1880) the arrival of new cohorts of educated and poetically active people has shattered these restraints and made poetry flatter in style, less demanding, more cheerful, more sensuous, and more diverse.

Theory C

There is no set of collective representations of how the parts of a poem should be governed, and so changes to this set are unreal (or inexplicable, or uninteresting). Assessing how innovative a poet is is irrelevant to judging their artistic merits. Fashion is a bad thing. Changes in the course of an artist's career are due to the workings of deeply inner temperament, fulfilling timeless patterns, rather than to changes in the wishes and beliefs of the audience.

Theory D

Poetry is a moral act and belongs within the defensive walls of a sanctified religion. Only a self-elected spiritual elite with access to the authorising works of the past can be trusted to control moral welfare, and so to control poetry. History went fundamentally wrong (in AD 449, or AD 1200, or AD 1520, or 1789, or 1914, or 1923, or 1945, or 1960), when it fell into the hands of levelling materialists, and time since then is essentially featureless. Modernity must be stamped out. It involves sex, and machines, and reasoning, and science, and democracy, and free verse. However, the timeless ("perennial") is available in the hands of a precious few masters.

This paranoid Christian strain would include Raine; Holbrook; Davie; Thwaite. I would like to add a benign Christian group, to include Morgan and Allchin.

Theory E

Several complex theses about the course of Welsh and Scottish poetry, within the aegis-thesis that English poetry became ineffective at some point, and that nationalism is the key knowledge which has made poets effective. This can also involve theories about territorial rooted-

ness, and belonging to a community (i.e. other than the literary one).

This current is represented by Conran, Hooker, and Crawford.

Theory F

The detailed account of stylistic succession prepared by Eric Homberger; his book stops in about 1973, and he complains of “balkanisation” making English poetic history impossible to write after that point.

This survey has identified problems in the uneven flow of time which this book will hope to shed light on. Theories C and D give us nothing concrete to test; theory A is the one the book will address, and it will move in the ambit of works by Crozier, Görtschacher, Mottram, Thurley, Booth, Sheppard, Riley, Bush, and the collective works edited respectively by Barry and Hampson, by Denise Riley, and by Acheson and Huk. Theory B will be discussed briefly through an essay by Crawford and Armitage; theory E will receive only partial coverage in this book, but is discussed in classic works by Conran and Hooker. The most effective studies of historical change within *Textmilieu* are by Conran, followed by Martin Booth, and in *Akros* issue 28. Theory F is complete as stated in Homberger’s classic work.

Another group can be segregated because they identify oppositions in poetic theory without supplying a set of dates to go along with them; in this group I put works by Allen Fisher, Roy Fisher, Adrian Clarke, Raworth, Riley (ed.).

Voices impel me to add two more versions. The first is apparently widespread, although it is nowhere stated in the sources listed. Its basic tenet is that there are two “significant” poets in each decade, and that the others are “minor” poets who don’t really repay consideration. The succession is roughly:

1950s = Larkin + Hill;
 1960s = Hughes + Heaney;
 1970s = Harrison;
 1980s = Motion + Grace Nichols + Craig Raine + Muldoon;
 1990s = Maxwell + Armitage.

This is a sort of “negative background” which nobody presents as a thesis. It may be implemented by various courses on modern poetry. It

is not defended by my sources, probably because it does not permit a book to be written, and because it is too conventional to be worth stating. The names can be varied slightly.

There are largely three groups of critics: the ones with a critical understanding of time, based on style analysis, and impressed by innovation; the ones who identify each decade with two or three poets and reduce time to the style and personalities of those foreground figures, who hide all the background; and those who resent the “star” theory and its exclusivity, but lack a critical theory of change and a sensitivity to style. Authors who do not perceive any collective change are unable to explain why the rules of poetry have shifted over the past fifty years, cannot give any explanation of how shifts in style relate to changes in economy and society, and cannot understand why poets argue about style. If you decide that only two or three poets per decade compose the subject, you write off the history of style along with all the other poems you have jettisoned as boring. The competing theories of the time line of change are, therefore, few, and they can largely be reconciled with each other.

It seems helpful to give a map of large-scale public movements, as hand-holds. This account, expounding theory A, is based on Wolfgang Görtzschacher’s extraordinarily thorough study of little magazines, the most detailed research yet done on our period. Wrey Gardiner names 4 periods: the Fifties; the BPR 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 Fifties may have been related to the scarcity of publishing outlets, as 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 Görtzschacher, “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 ‘fifties and early sixties 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

sixties". 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 'sixties 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 Sixties, 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 sixties and early seventies"; in the Sixties, there were 2000 poetry magazines (p.503), but the numerical peak was in the early Seventies. These 'zines did tend to have low print quality, messy layouts, and stapled spines.

(3) The commodity boom of the Seventies multiplied the price of paper, and inflation eventually provoked consumer withdrawal: "The late 'seventies 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 seventies and early eighties [. . .] 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 Eighties, he says, "This technical evolution [availability of microprocessors and 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. Eric Mottram's classic essay on the "British poetry revival" (BPR) traces only an upward trajectory, from 1960–74, but was written in 1974; his known, if undocumented, disillusion after 1977 fits in well with the Austrian's schema. So that the broad underlying lines of these three interpretations supply the time curve which we accept for this work. Of course, there are other proposed chronologies. We will discuss one to see if the basic theory A can be found fault with.

The Penguin Book of Poetry since 1945 (ed. Robert Crawford and Simon Armitage, 1999) has an Introduction which attempts to describe the history of poetry during the period. It describes the whole era since 1945 as the triumph of the democratic voice. If you assert your unique identity, or if you assert pluralism and inconsistency, you are counted as part of the democratic voice. This is meaningless; I can't see how it analyses anything if it has no boundaries. It seems more like a cultural field than anything existing in the works of any single poet. His definition of the democratic voice, then, is mystificatory; what he is not saying is "dumbing down". As a description of the cultural field, it is a screen behind which the issues of market preferences, the division of the market, the clash of classes represented by different educational levels, and the process of making taste, are hidden. Crawford has no interest in educating public taste; some critics or editors want to help the reader to deal with complex, dense, and innovative poetry, but not this one. If Crawford does not engage with a thirty-year lag between public taste and the practice of poets, it may be because he personally is 30 years behind. This is not a crime, but he fares badly from a comparison with Iain Sinclair or Ken Edwards, as anthologists. Much modern poetry is critical of conventional poetics and of the dominant social order. Crawford finds this shocking and unpleasant—and therefore unaesthetic and not part of real poetry. The chronology within the volume reveals that age brings legitimacy and authority: he is able to stomach senior rebels but not ones under 70. Someone who enforces order is not going to be happy about critique or dissidence.

The division between post-1945 and pre-1945 is said to be the domination of the 1930s by an educated coterie, and of the later period by the democratic voice. The idea that the reading audience of the 1930s,

the ancien régime, were intellectual, is charming but absurd; the English middle class disliked ideas, as any social history will point out; they were up to 40 times as likely to read Robert Bridges or Vita Sackville-West as Auden. Auden dominates the 1930s only in a retro-selective perspective set up by Oxford poets and critics and now accepted by Crawford. In comparison, Prynne dominates the 70s artistically, and in my personal suite of images and processes, but not in terms of the market. The overall shape in the 1930s shows an advanced, “difficult”, minority taste, and a comfortable, undemanding, safe majority taste, and this shape has not changed. This anthology eliminates “low” work by authors who matured before about 1966, and “high” work by writers who emerged since that date. This identifies, rather accurately, a thirty-year lag in the dissemination of cultural attitudes. It gives the bizarre impression that, the more hundreds of thousands of graduates there were in the population, the less intelligent poetry became.

Why would an increase in the scale of national education produce a decrease in the intelligence of poetry? I don’t follow this, but one reading is “because I am going to deny the existence of intelligent modern poetry in order to peddle the pop/mainstream merger”. We get experimental (or: linguistically radical) poems by Finlay (b.1923) and Morgan (b.1924), both of them pacifists during the Second World War; younger radical poets don’t get a look in. Well, of course, they aren’t historically significant—as long as history is made and written in Oxford. Consulting the anthologies *A Various Art*, *the new british poetry*, and *Conductors of Chaos* would have been a good idea here. In fact, the portrait of the modern style in Lucie-Smith’s anthology of 1971 is better than the one offered here. One version could be: someone conservative couldn’t believe they were important or significant or important because they weren’t using the traditional signs of authority. The pacifist stance was extremely unpopular in the war; could it be the fact that we are still reading their work today, and not that of their contemporaries, is related to their political extremism? and that Crawford’s band of conformists will also vanish like snow in Las Vegas when a few years have gone by?

The account of history offered reproduces what Crawford says in his specialist works on territory and decentralisation. This is an example of an academic digging a trench-like specialism which he can defend, and then mistaking it for the whole wide world. As a marketing ploy in the portfolio of ecumenical cultural management, it’s admirable; as a treat-

ment of time or sociology, it's a failure. He does not attempt to differentiate between the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. He is a low-conflict type chap: good observation spots differences, but social unity is favoured by suppressing it. Strange things happen to language when social conflict surfaces in it. The denial of change denies the conscious activity of cultural managers; by making it invisible, their work is made uncontroversial. The only real power is invisible power. Suppose what is defined as common sense is actually a set of frail, tendentious, factional, and non-consultative guesses? Suppose what you are conforming to, to avoid conflict, is something this tendentious?

Dating the shift to the 1944 Education Act which made them possible is a way of suppressing the 1960s, with a tidal wave of working class teenagers going to university and writing poetry; which means you can ignore the left-wing, revolutionary, class politics which dominated the poetry of the time; and that you can ignore the conflict engulfing the old middle-class cultural manners. Disagreement is retro-edited out; and the offensive of a restorative and aggressive new middle class after 1979 does not get mentioned—either in the introduction or in any of the poems in the book. Could this be because Crawford did very well out of it? Were the changes in education for the poor really initiated by central governmental action, or was that a response to a century of working-class activism and especially to the brilliant and vocal and irrefutable working-class radicals produced by the sickness of capitalism in the 1930s? A response—with the idea of suppressing the stimulus, perhaps; a way of eliminating vanguardism.

The use of ethnicity to replace class implies that all culture is a historical lag from 500 AD: heritage replaces politics. Continuity replaces conjecture. Selecting poets of different tribes is not proof that you are unbiased, and therefore perfect, if all the poems selected are very similar to each other. "We play both kinds of music—Country AND Western." The write-off of ideas eliminates change and consciousness. Knowledge is only of "heritage" and the possibility of new creation, like that which originally created the "national cultures", is closed out. The date of the boundaries freezing may be 900 AD, or, in some perspectives, it might be much older. The introduction points to dialect as an index of social variation, and praises itself for encompassing this diversity, and includes dialect poems at a level of about 1%. 1%—a marginal amount by most standards; especially when it is being used homeopathically to hide the exclusion of poetological and political dissent. Accent is possibly the one level of language that has no meaning and

doesn't reflect inner states. According to Wakelin's standard work, the major dialect boundaries in Britain reflect the borders of the major kingdoms as they were in 700 AD. They represent continuity and the picturesque, not dissent or self-direction.

Claiming the advance to "democracy" as starting in 1944 elides the foreground stylistic feature of the 1950s, the advance of academic and neo-metaphysical poetry based in the universities and in the New Criticism. The leading new poets from the 1950s as printed here are Geoffrey Hill, Roy Fisher, and Charles Tomlinson, not usually regarded as chatty, cheeky, and cheerful. The new style in poetry was serious and ambitious because that is what the working-class teenagers who got into university were like. Meanwhile it was Betjeman who enjoyed the mass sales, and it was his comforting and amusing family sentimentality which became mandatory for non-high poets over the next 40 years. He had spotted the mass middle-class market: it was Auden who assimilated to him, not vice versa. Underneath this old middle class security, competitive, critical, and class-conscious working-class youth created a revolutionary art in the 1960s and 1970s. After 1979, a lot of retrospective repression and effacing had to be done, and qualified staff emerged to do it.

A public space must be policed to keep the peace and to allow voices to be heard. Culture depends on the temporary absence of strife and quarrel; a space where we lay our weapons aside and where we pay attention rather than simply reciting our own pleas. A cultural manager enforces these rules *nolens volens*. The shared space is fragile, but the result is an anthology like this one which can be sold in the High Street and will achieve broad circulation.

Distinguish the following: we have to get on with each other you have to keep quiet while someone is talking people who disagree will be silenced.

The Christian Ethical View of the Poem

The 1960s produced a split in poetry criticism between the non-projective, materialist, comparative, and technical view, associated with intellectuals, the Left, and with working-class academics; and the identifying, humanized, ethical, approach, which was Christian in inspiration and conservative in results. The Christian view deals with individual souls in a static environment, and so is hostile (or indiffer-

ent) to historical or sociological accounts which deal with change or group feeling. Exceptions to this would be the arrival of the End Time with the approach of the Messiah; and the stages of the Church settlement in England. Christianity, admirably, puts all humans on the same footing, so that typification, where one poet stands for all (and the poet of 1960 mystically "is" the poet of 1920), is something they find sympathetic. In the light of this very strong normative sense of how to behave, human behaviour which differs is a transgression, and the differences fit into the drama of a single soul, oscillating around the norm. In literary criticism with the Christian-ethical approach, there is a general lack of accounts of time, or technique, or the shared milieu, or links to politics or to other arts; this sums up the alienation of the New Left from academic discourse as they found it. The history of technique is here not available, because style is being used as a window on character and ethical progress. The drama of the loss of cultural creativity of the Anglican communion is made undramatic by the psychological fact that the Anglicans don't feel any need of extra poetry written after 1700.

There is no style-history within the mainstream of poetry because the mainstream resists change. A failure of formal analysis serves the art-political purpose of disguising this immobility. A flat ethical view of the world flattens out history in the cause of a timeless present of ethical guardianship. The concept of a (confined) central place where everything of significance happens suits the media, who need to legitimate their own judgments at the same time as legitimating what they judge; the Christian reduction of all human souls to one fits in with this, but is different in kind.

Kathleen Morgan's book *Christian Themes in Contemporary Poetry* traces a Christian idea of poetry which is caught in the complex static pattern of the individual soul, and unable to deal with historical change and with collective representations other than religious doctrines. This allows us to see the overwhelming similarity of the Christian stance to that of the academic critic, and to guess that this image of the character carrying out ethical tests seized in the static and overall text accounts for the lack of historical or stylistic thinking in the available works on poetry. The exceptions bear the mark of a committed leftism, an intellectual milieu of high standards which nonetheless has ethical beliefs which inhibit historical theorising beyond a certain point.

It is fairly simple to get from Morgan to the ethical and anti-modern views of Holbrook and Abbs, which are undoubtedly a transmuted

Christianity, the more aggressive and feeble for being outside the institutional framework of the Church, the more sterile for rejecting what they see around them (and claiming revolutionary originality for this). Morgan's attitude, in 1965, is very similar to Canon Allchin's in his recent work *Praise above all: Discovering the Welsh Tradition*, which discusses David Jones amongst others, and is a theory of what poetry ought to be. As befits a Christian, he regards historical change over the past eight centuries or so as superficial compared to the really deep truths.

The Age Class

If we look at G. S. Fraser's collected *Essays on 20th C poetry*, we will first of all be impressed by the breadth of coverage, and, if we read the text, by his sympathy and skill. But then we may note that the youngest (with one exception) poet in the book was born in 1910 and published his first book in 1944: a puzzle, since the volume of essays was published in 1977. One explanation would be that there was no interesting English or Scottish poetry in the period 1950-77; an explanation I dismiss on several grounds. Another explanation, noting the connection between the years of birth of MacCaig and of Fraser (b.1915), has to do with the disrespect of the old for the young: the sociological inhibition on taking seriously the ideas and emotions of people a few years younger than you. One version has to do with the critic's sensibility drying up: but Fraser has no problem with poems published when he was well into middle age, so long as they were published by someone older than he was. An extension has to do with disappointment. Critics tend to be hypnotised by their own poetry, or by the poetry which they dream of writing. Fraser was an estimated and widely read poet when he was young, and till he was about 40; he did not pursue this line of writing, nor (within limits) did his readership expand. We could guess that, when much of his emotional energy was going into thinking about writing, his identification with other poets was intense, and so was his curiosity about the fine detail of their work, and consequently he was readily able to record what he had already noticed in an organised form. Losing interest, it may be, in his own career, he lost interest in the careers of other poets; with an exception, almost a prolongation of youth, for the figures he had already profoundly identified with. The faculty which forms identifications is, we are speculating, both weak