

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paranoia; forcing them to do other work to make a living; forcing them to write in conventional and light modes or go unpublished.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.