

Origins of the Underground

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*British poetry between apocryphon
and incident light, 1933–79*

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CAMBRIDGE

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Preface

The background to *Origins of the Underground* is really the story of how British poets became intellectuals. As they retreated from inherited and fixed value systems, they had to think for themselves, and this was a race which intellectuals generally won. You can't just buy in ideas like a small tropical country buying jet fighter planes. What the success of poets seems to turn on is their willingness to use ideas which excite the ideas part of their brains because they are genuinely unfamiliar. Poets who prefer to stick to well-worn and inherited arguments, where they can predict every move, fail for this reason. The area of nearby uncertainty has an odd shape. Obviously, most of the ideas which were new and risky thirty years ago are now forgotten—the risk fell to earth, so to speak. A certain archaeology is needed to retrieve these “casualty” ideas. I admit that I enjoy this sort of digging, and the practice of psychoceramics (the scientific study of crackpots), but perhaps this pleasure pursuit is useful as well. The terrain is made impassable by deep mutual disagreements between different groups of poetry readers (and writers). Going in at the level of ideas offers a possible way of easing these disagreements. Admittedly, it's very difficult to find out exactly what they are.

Lagging behind rather, critics turn up and have to write history of ideas in order to get at the poems. This is not a finished science but a provisional one. We can remark, even at this early stage, that the histories of ideas which deal with what was being said in university philosophy departments are of no use. Poets use a different set of ideas. Further, the theme is information in general, rather than abstract ideas. More exactly, it is the imaginative rules by which one visualises social processes. The history of what appears in photographs is very important

to our subject. Some of the ideas belong properly in the psychoceramics lab. Unless you know something about dear old crackpots like Jung and Olson, you have very little chance of understanding modern British poetry.

I accept that putting the history of ideas on a quantitative basis is an advance—because hundreds of ideas were in circulation, because one idea was more important than another, we would like to measure just how important each one was. I have not tried to do this. I found the *stories* of people like Stephen Tallents, Joseph Macleod, or David Gascoyne captivating. I am aware that lighting a few paths through the vaporous mass of ideas floating around in the period does not amount to a full intellectual history. All I can say is that the extent of such a history would be vast. The studies I needed were not available, but I hope this preliminary and partial study may be useful to other students one day. The selection of lines was guided by curiosity—I am aware that the ones studied may be marginal, but they are more interesting at this date than more central themes which we are all familiar with. And which my colleagues have explained so well.

Reviews of my previous book tended to find it “exasperating” or “infuriating”. I apologise for this. You can believe that I knew anger would block the message from being taken in. I wanted to liberate people from anger, but it seems I took their anger off the leash. Examining disagreement does not, in fact, always tend to reduce it. I am unhappy at the territorial metaphor invoked—I am sure that modern poetry is so complex that two readers, well into it, are seeing quite different pictures, freely co-designed by themselves. In fact, this complexity and this suggestibility are the conditions which modern poetry strives for. Francis Berry is a good example of a difficult and suggestive writer—leaving aside the question of misreading of various lines in the poem, two readers surely form different experiences in such poems. If my response is so deeply subjective, it is illegitimate to call it “wrong” all the time. These furies of territorial defence—of litigatory passion and excretion—have no *locus standi*.

Unfortunately, this new book is partly about how conservative cultural managers excluded various ideas, styles, and people they disapproved of, and how the stylistic choices of the most gifted poets were influenced by hatred of the cultural managers—so I may shake up the liquors of wrath again. I don’t see how I could avoid this without falsification. Cultural products ask people to assimilate but one of the most common responses is to dissimilate. Negative reactions, denial, withdrawal, inversion, are key behaviours. The favoured political pattern in

this society is two *opposed* parties. Stylistic choice has to do with rejection, dread of pollution, fear of contamination by being like people you dislike—not *just* with longing and attraction. The same TLS review which found the last book infuriating compared the English literary establishment, at some length, to Stalinism in the 1940s. Once you understand that analogy, huge tracts of the landscape become visible and readable.

The modernity of modern poetry is suited to minimise the territorial investment, the sense of trespass and violation, the barbed wire, the trench lines. It is designed to supply a stable and capacious external space, boundless and yet reassuring, personal and yet full of other people.

I have to point out, given the craving of reviewers to assume the opposite, that this is not a one-volume history of the period—I intend to publish at least two more volumes on the period since 1960. Reviewers wanted a book to be a one-volume history of the national poetry so that they could find it wanting and tear it to bits. This urge had a lot to do with display acts of protection and loyalty—they could not arraign me for omitting their favourite poets (or, themselves) unless I offered completeness. The act of valiant defender can't start unless someone, i.e. me, is doing injustice. It is a parental vision, and involves a modern-sized family, with no more than three children. Critics want to build big green visions of how things really are, with comfortable and lush niches for the poets they want to protect. This rural vision is somehow linked to the English love of landscape painting. It involves solitude—a very small number of poets. It doesn't want to know about one hundred excelling poets. It is a *private* landscape. My book violated this tender vision, its rolling pastureland. Even though it wasn't an account of the national poetry but only of innovation. Much extra material not intended to appear in books is on my website at www.pinko.org.

This isn't a one-volume history either. There are at least one hundred contemporary poets whom I regard as *national art treasures*, and I would want at least 500 pages to explain why. Further, there is already a mass of writing about the period, and, like a footballer, I must "go for space". I am *selectively* gathering unfamiliar information. Describing all the poetry published in the 1940s was not my project. I haven't written about Auden because there is masses written about him. Generally, if you read ten books on recent literary history you do find that they do all say the same things. This makes reading them a wearing experience. I intend to bang on until you complain about me including too much.

This book does not follow a progressive line of time. It radiates out from a central problem that the most interesting British poetry is remote from public view.

In the introduction, xxiii–xxxii, we gloomily describe the problem and quote a lot of poems to show that the occluded is worth de-occluding. On pages 1–14, we look at the exclusion of the 1940s New Romantics, around 1950, as a possible analogy to the exit from the mainstream in the 1960s. We introduce *A Various Art*, a 1987 anthology of uncelebrated writers which we hope to shed light on. On pp.15–22, we go back to the forties to look at self-critical, reflexive poets of that time. On pages 23–81 we look at the school which produced the poets of *A Various Art*, and consider possible influences from the 1930s (Objectivism) and 1940s (Charles Madge). On pp.82–97 we go backwards to look at British State propaganda between the wars, as a set of myths, ruthlessly repeated, which constituted what poets retreated from. We are depressed to see how far it created the school of British documentary, with its appearance of being truthful and left-wing. We return to further discussion of neo-Objectivism, now with a more informed view of the cult of objectivity. Following the theme of photography, and capture of new channels of data, we look on pp.109–128 at the history of the information filling poetry, a dialectic pattern whereby an excess of inflowing data led to changes in the structure of the poem. On pp.142–185 we consider the New Romantic school of the 1940s—a contraction of the radius of interest to the body, a rejection of documentary knowledge, world news, group propaganda, and precision, in favour of intuition and personal myth. Unfortunately, we have already seen that the *A Various Art* school was based on reflexivity and interrogation of visible light—an inheritance of themes just cannot be. The New Romantics were anarchist and pacifist. On pp. 186–209, we look at the haunted New Romantic figure of David Gascoyne, ending up in the 1980s with the occultist magazine *Temenos*, edited by another forties poet, Kathleen Raine. So perhaps the offspring of the 1940s are not the school of Prynne but the New Age. Intrigued, we move on to look, pp.210–221, at Iain Sinclair, who is in *A Various Art* but writes mainly about deluded New Age figures; and, pp.223–235, at the New Age and Counter Culture, social-political movements which may be the poles of attraction which drew poets away from the mainstream and the High Street, and which want to found a new knowledge in special states of awareness. Anarchism? pacifism? distrust of machines? is this a return of the New Romantic 1940s? At pp.236–253 we take a trip back to the 1920s to reveal the origins of the Counter-Culture in certain

intellectual currents, largely derived from Symbolism, which influenced the New Romantics and only later gave rise to the New Age. On pp.254-261 we look at the Scottish end of New Romanticism and at avant-garde folk music. On pp.262-271 we move back to the 1970s to examine the struggle between Left and Right in the Labour Party as the source of embitterment which poisoned relations between mainstream and underground factions in poetry, the mutual contempt of pragmatists and idealists. On pp. 272-284, we look at the idea of autogestion, a society with totally decentralised power, as an inspiration for poetry which hyperassociates at every step—the loose joints. We dredge up a link between the forties radicalism of Asger Jorn and the high-riding Situationism of May 68 (he founded it). And are disappointed to find it's over.

Chronology

- 1840s Start of the Occult Revival, an inseparable part of the Symboliste Movement. Driven by opposition to the rise of science and scepticism.
- circa 1850 William Fox Talbot, *The Talbotype applied to hieroglyphics*, an avowedly Neoplatonist project. We ask whether English photographers want to capture reality, or to fix ideal scenes in visual form.
- 1881 William Morris sets up his works at Merton Abbey. Start of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Attack on machine production, praise of the hand-made. Village thinking; the back to the land movement.
- 1889 Publication of *Lux Mundi*, in which Anglican theologians take on and try to absorb modern science and scholarship, and launch the kenotic strand of theology; whose preoccupation with the Incarnation leads on to the Apocalyptic concern with the human body.
- 1900 Founding by Oedenkoven of a Theosophist and Naturist colony at Ascona (Switzerland);
- 1906 Start of activities of Otto Gross, leading light of Ascona and chief influence on DH Lawrence.
- 1909 Crowley and Victor Neuburg go into the desert to try and put the Neoplatonic “calls” left by Edward Kelley into practice.
- 1910 Modernism not happening in Britain.
- 1912 Georgian poetry, a reform involving: reduction of verbal complexity, refusal of egoism; lower-class social scenes; crafts and the countryside, physical work; humility; new rhythms, close to speech and dialect. This influence pervades the rest of the century.
- circa 1914 Edward Thomas breaks through into real poetry, his “imagined village”.
- 1915 *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of non-European Races*, by William Ridgway; ecstatic culture of the colonised.
- circa 1920 Founding of Surrealism, an offshoot of Dada. Interest in dreams, the inexplicable, the mystic side

- of Romanticism, the unconscious, European occultism, Protestant mysticism, the cultures of the colonised. Forerunner of Apocalyptic movement.
- 1920 Modernism not happening in Britain.
- 1920s Peak of Ascona. Foundation of academic literary criticism, a new discipline, with orientation towards scepticism and precision. Peak of Spiritualist Church, with focus on prophecy and spirit guides.
- 1923 *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, D. H. Lawrence. Occultist work based on a sun myth.
- 1926 Debut of H.J. Massingham, key figure of the topographic school; anomalies or buried powers of the countryside.
- 1927 Film, "Drifters", released. Foundation of British Documentary Movement by Stephen Tallents. Max Plowman's book on Blake. Jack Lindsay's anthology of "bedlam" poetry (the wisdom of madness; the irrational as poetic).
- 1928-31 Experiment magazine in Cambridge, bringing intelligence into culture; reception of cinema and Surrealism.
- 1930 Death of modernism as the Depression re-orientes the cultivated public towards politics and realism. Start of the "pylons" school in poetry, what the New Romantics sought to abolish.
- 1931 Objectivist Anthology published in Poetry (Chicago). "Apocalypse" (Lawrence).
- 1932 *The Projection of England*, by Stephen Tallents. A formulation of a national iconography as a scheme for propaganda; based on the English gentleman, stress on privatisation, leisure, games, tailoring.
- 1933 founding of Eranos conferences by Rudolf Otto, organised by Olga Froebe-Kapteyn, held in Ascona. Probable peak of pacifism in UK, with a celebrated vote at the Oxford Union not to defend "king and country". Early books by Dylan Thomas, Barker, and Gascoyne.
- 1934 *Variations on a Time Theme*, Edwin Muir; 2nd edition of *Human History*, Elliot Smith

- 1936 Start of “organic” farming in England, based on the “bio-dynamism” of occultist Rudolf Steiner. Flourishing of organic farming in the Third Reich.
- 1935 *Life Quest*, Richard Aldington; first attempt to write the poetry of ideas in England? *Foray of Centaurs*, Joseph Macleod (unpublished 2nd version).
- 1936 Yeats’ Oxford Book of Modern Verse enshrines a history of neo-Symbolism and visionary trances, bypassing anything realist or documentary.
- 1936 Surrealist Exhibition in London. English Surrealism largely found itself as the Apocalyptic movement. Outbreak of Spanish Civil War breaks up the pacifist line as the Left quite rapidly turns in favour of a “just war”. Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality*, places poetry close to dreams and the irrational, talks about ‘dream work’.
- 1937 *Britain and the Beast*, edited Clough Williams-Ellis. A defence of the ‘rural amenities’ of Britain; articulation of dislike of machines and mechanical modernity, forerunner of the Apocalyptic. Founding of Mass Observation movement by Harrison, Madge and Jennings. Pacifists take to communal farming as a withdrawal from the State. Paris Exhibition; British Pavilion extols virtues of privatisation, leisure, games, good tailoring. John Goodland is formulating the Apocalyptic creed. Start of *Wales*, and a brilliant school of poets, arrival of Anglo-Welsh poetry. Conflict of Tallents and Macleod at BBC.
- 1938 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, defines Apocalypse in personalist terms. *Famine in England*, a plea for organic farming by the Earl of Portsmouth, evokes one of the four horsemen, and attacks the object-machine.
- 1939 Huge wave of loyal propaganda produces British sentiments, eclipse of peripheral nationalism until a new boom in the second half of the 1960s. Small nation nationalisms articulate themselves as anti-war because the war was defending the Empire. Recycling of 30s Left imagery, characters, etc. as images of national unity.

- 1939 Pilgrim Trust programme of painters recording old and fragile things. Possible start of the “catalogue of beauties’ style — anomalies of the countryside. *The New Apocalypse* published.
- 1939 “Entrance to Lane”, by Graham Sutherland; anomalies or buried powers of the countryside. Basic to New Romantic painting.
- 1940–50 Flourishing of New Romantic school.
- 1940–8 *Horizon*.
- 1940– After fall of France, the U-boat blockade; national energies focus on food and farming; “dig for victory”.
- 1941 1st issue of magazine “Helhesten”, edited by Asger Jorn. Union of Surrealism and local folk mythology.
- 1942 Helpmann “Hamlet” ballet. The whole set represents the “nightmare of the dying prince”. (Archbishop) William Temple, *The Church and the Social Order*, part of the line of social engagement which parallels the documentary movement.
- 1940s Thriving of neo-Romantic painters: mystic configurations, anomalies of the countryside, visions.
- 1943 *The Inward Animal*, by Terence Tiller (pp.15–22)
- 1945 *Marxism and Poetry*, by George Thomson; defines everything except folksong as inauthentic
- 1945–51 Attlee government; creation of the Welfare State.
- 1946 Effective stop of Mass Observation. Dismantling of wartime propaganda apparatus.
- 1947 *In Trust for the Nation*, ed. Williams-Ellis; illustrations by Barbara Jones; “catalogue of beauties” style book about the holdings of the National Trust. Frye’s book on Blake.
- 1948 Formation of COBRA group of abstract artists, with Asger Jorn as theorist.
- 1949 *New Romantic Anthology*. Last anthology of the New Romantic/apocalyptic movement.
- 1948–65 Especially dolorous’ time for Anglo-Welsh poetry; similar low period for Scottish poetry.
- 1950 Launch of wonderful Key Poets series of pamphlets.
- 1950 Termination of Key Poets series by Communist Party leadership. *Contemporary Verse*, Kenneth

- Allott's anthology writing the New Romantics out of history.
- Eternally, but at least 1951-80 Left-right struggles within Labour party, model for opposition between "idealists" and common sense in poetry.
- 1950-2 Collapse of institutional bases for New Romantics.
- 1953 Publication of Eliade's *Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstasy* kindle an interest in ecstatic religion, reprising themes of Spiritualism. *Script from Norway*, Joseph Macleod.
- 1953 Barbara Jones book on *Follies and Grottoes*. Anomalies of the countryside.
- 1950s Cultural crisis of Anglican Church. Switch of values away from inherited literary beauty towards something "live", urban, youthful, and relevant. First generation of English poets not dominated by Anglicanism is maturing. Small-scale dissemination of new ideas about ecstatic religion and personal religion. *Nimbus* (1951-8) features Eliade, Ascona, as well as late New Romanticism.
- 1956-? K Raine working on Blake's sources, on Neoplatonist lines. She probably links Spiritualism and Neoplatonism?
- mid-1950s Return of a consumer economy, led by housing and "white goods". End of austerity. Reversion of propaganda energy to advertising – propaganda for the household.
- 1956 Easter Marches unify pacifist and Christian opinion in anti-nuclear protests; rise of CND.
- 1956 Russian invasion of Hungary brings about a secession from British Communist Party and a "New Left" whose influence on poetry is disputed.
- 1957 Formation of Situationist International by Asger Jorn.
- 1958 A.L. Morton's book on Blake's sources.
- mid-1950s Return of a consumer economy, led by housing and 'white goods'. End of austerity. Reversion of propaganda energy to advertising – propaganda for the household.
- 1959 *Songs*, by Christopher Logue. Start of folk boom.

- 1959 or 1960 Start of British Poetry Revival, according to Görtschacher or Mottram. Unrevived poetry lingers on in a kind of living death (to the present day).
- 1960 *City*, Roy Fisher. 1st publication of the poetry revival. The first English poet to imagine the city.
- 1961-4 “Dog Star Man”, Stan Brakhage.
- 1962 *The New Poetry*, anthology. Alvarez intro links inner space to insight into the cosmic order, fulfilling an Apocalyptic programme.
- 1963 *Honest To God*, Bishop John Robinson, radical (bultmannian) demythologising.
- 1963- Jeff Nuttall continues New Romantic line of the dominance of physiology; stress on sound, noun strings, reduced syntactic articulation. Ancestral to the London School. Rediscovery of Objectivism in Britain. Reading of Rakosi, Zukofsky, Oppen, Olson.
- 1960s generally Interest in Blake, ecstatic “altered states”, Third World religion, inner space, Jung, personal myth
- 1965? Start of revival of Scottish and Welsh national sentiment.
- 1966-70 *The English Intelligencer*.
- 1967 Craze for psychedelic music. Origin of Counter-Culture (hippies, psychedelia . . .). Fashion for the non-Western. Founding of Grosseteste Review. Origin of Ferry Press/Grosseteste school. *The Society of the Spectacle*, by Guy Debord.
- 1968-75 Era of student revolts. Challenges to inherited academic approaches. Literary criticism becomes more diverse. Links between New Left, Counter culture, and underground poetry remain controversial.
- 1968 *From Glasgow to Saturn*, by Edwin Morgan.
- circa 1968 End of wave of films about the Second World War. Replaced by other configurations.
- 1969 *The White Stones*, by J.H. Prynne. Founding of RILKO
- 1970 *Crow*, by Ted Hughes; apex of myth/inner space/primitive religion current.
- 1970 Publishing of *The Leaves of Spring*, by Aaron Esterson. Discusses young female schizophrenics in the sense