

Don't Start Me Talking

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Don't Start Me Talking

Interviews with Contemporary Poets

Edited by

TIM ALLEN & ANDREW DUNCAN

Interviews conducted by: Tim Allen, Andrew Duncan,
Steve Pereira, M.P. Ryan and R.F. Walker



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To David Herd and Robert Potts – visionary editors for a new sight

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Introduction

Words are an archaic system, full of ambiguity. Modern poetry, rather consistently, strives to follow and enhance this ambiguity. Each line opens a number of pathways. Different readers follow different pathways. Their choice then predisposes them to certain responses to succeeding lines. Readers diverge—without failing, without breaking the rules, without missing the impact or the point. Where the evidence you collect always proves your initial suppositions right, you can, instead, move through the poetry to a world of your own. Permissiveness and suggestibility go together. Suggestive verbal patterns allow free interpretation and increase diversity. This landscape of conjecture, rapid leaps of intuition, self-reference, and shifting values, is the inside of the poems as well as the outside they swim through. Everyone follows the path which suits them.

In the 1970s, there was a great increase in the complexity of English poetry. Several dozen modern-style, ambiguous poets created a burst of unique trajectories—a real landscape to sustain the freedom designed at the start. This left much of the audience behind, and prose commentary was desirable. Prynne was against explaining anything (and in favour of resistance and difficulty), while Mottram when taking over *Poetry Review* got rid of the reviews and began just listing published works. This evacuation of the mediating space, of prose and instruction, by the leaders of the scene, possibly influenced everyone else away from explaining things. The brain produces this rich suggestibility—if it is held back by fatigue, or by rage and resentment, it will fail to respond to the words and lines at all. That is, the reader collaborates in the production of the text-response. The poem is inaudible until the reader creates it. It has much less sensory existence than music or painting—which may be why

the institutions have not accepted modernity in poetry in the way they have, for example, in the visual arts. A number of conservative critics specialise in destructive un-readings of artistic texts. There is modern poetry, and writing which presents itself as the theory of modern literature, but the latter does not account for the former by any applicable standards. For whatever reasons, reviewing did not flourish in the underground scene. The series of interviews which Mottram carried out at the National Poetry Centre (which were published at the time in *Poetry Information*) were gleaming exceptions. It may in fact be that reading modern poetry in large quantities is the only effective preparation for reading any single text of modern poetry. The nucleus of prose explaining modern British poetry is, along with issues of *Spanner* magazine, certain interviews—read and re-read by the interested. Some which have become modern classics are ones with Roy Fisher, Peter Riley, and Ken Smith. We began to collect interviews with poets in September 2003.

The scene needs a Fable in which a great innovator is scorned by the fogey-ogres for many years and then wins all the prizes, as part of a needed argument against the fogey-ogres. This fable has outlived the status and shared values which it relies on. There is a pressure on the poetic 'underground' to form stable scales of value in order to show unity in verbal struggles against the mainstream. This may blur the structural inconsistency and nonconformism within the scene. There is a problem, evidently, in saying 'all aesthetic values are uncertain and sociologically conditioned' and, simultaneously, 'our sector is aesthetically superior and this is a fact we all agree on'. There is some kind of consensus about the importance of Raworth, Allen Fisher, and Prynne. But this is very different from the kind of consensus which existed at earlier stages of society—or the kind which features in the fantasies of acclaim of adolescent poets. No-one is bound by it. The institutions have yet to accept the innovators of the 1960s, or unclench the prizes for them.

Someone did a count and found over 2000 new books of poetry being published in a year. This suggests maybe 20,000 in a ten-year period. You have to decide not to read most of these. The key decisions are all made on the basis of no evidence. Of course this makes poets miserable. There is a traffic in reputation which lets you decide what not to read—and which is based on superficial stylistic signs, not on deep reliable knowledge. Poets develop stylistic assets in the hope that they will be recognised as owning those assets, that these assets will form a reputation in

the world for them, that a group will use those assets to form its selective consumption choices. All of this is chancy, unreliable.

Theory fails to be useful as theory if it fails various tests. For example, it may be explanations about poetry being written in around 1914, which is masquerading as a theory of modern poetry. Or, it may ignore all salient questions. Or, it may address texts which are of very faint interest. Or, it may be one-dimensional, focussing on one factor, over which it feels a kind of ownership, while obscuring the fact that poetic attention is many-dimensional and a poet has to manage a many-dimensional array of stimuli. Or, it may deal with planes of existence which are not really literary and which have little to say about whether a text is good or bad, or what helps us to understand it. Or, it may provide an explanation of something which is not happening in any really existing poems.

There are now thousands of poets writing. We didn't interview all of them. The selection process was not especially robust. Quite probably, hundreds of poets would have given interesting interviews. It would be pleasant to say that 'folks, there are another 90 interviews on the way, so don't worry about the gaps', but the usual material problems of exhaustion, satiation, etc. inhibit this. The selection procedure is probably worth discussing briefly. We drew up a short list because we knew there would only be room for 25-30 interviews. The names on the list were based on intuition, partiality, decades of alternating pleasure and frustration, pre-rational all-over washes of feeling. Where there were recent and readily available interviews, we moved on. For example, a whole book of Allen Fisher interviews is announced (from Salt Publishing). Some poets, though, were excluded on qualitative grounds. We didn't want to read texts which were close to application forms, fliers for gigs, book jackets, and other publicity material. It seemed possible to interview some mainstream poets, for contrast, but looking at published interviews made it seem that some people who write conventionally can't even articulate their prejudices in a cogent way. Theory can be bureaucratic. Granting bodies set criteria in search of accountability. They make these criteria public, to achieve fairness. Grant-seeking professional poets register the criteria and compose their work to fulfil them. They spend many days a year filling in grant application forms, matching their work to the criteria. Eventually—and increasingly since 1974 or so—composing the work came to be an extension of filling in the forms, and the criteria became the generative nucleus of the work. We have chosen not to interview

such poets. We believe that it would be better to publish the grant application forms. Such people do not have conversations, they practice networking and do validation. This was one of the tests. Another was the willingness to talk in serious terms, rather than to deflect all questions in favour of giggling inanity. Another was the ability to articulate thought processes. In the upshot, we were talking to a tiny area of conscious innovators.

Some kind of theoretical background has been supplied by M. P. Ryan's classic doctoral thesis on *Career Patterns in Contemporary Poetry*. 'The system which produces, disseminates, and evaluates poems can be seen as a loose network or sets of networks characterised by both co-operation and competition. Historically, it must not be conceived as a stable system in which each state evolves from the preceding state, but as [. . .] an interaction of adaptive and fluctuating forces[.]' (p.394) Further, 'the condition of poetry resembles Kuhn's description of science in a 'pre-paradigmatic period': insecurity, random selection from a wide range of models, continual debate over methods, and a proliferation of theories 'with the incompleteness of logical contact that consistently characterises paradigm debates'.' (p.403) Ryan is not implying that a state with a shared paradigm of values is on its way. This is a most unlikely outcome. The remark about *a wide range of models* means that poets, and readers, have no shared standard of values. The implication for a poet is that their ascribed 'value' shoots up and down in size as they pass from one room to another, or even as they cross one room. One faction of people thinks they're great—another faction thinks they're mediocre, grandiose, or out of date. The discontinuity exists at the level of microsocial space. Poets have in fact to impose a solidity on the fleeting vapours of beauty and opinion in order to retain psychological and linguistic cohesion. They wish—I suspect—for a book they've written to have a stable value, and to retain that value still 20 years later. They want to achieve status. That is, they wish for the shimmering multiplicity of values to stop when it reaches their door.

There is an unambiguous winner from the collapse of norms and genre conventions: the individual. Free will, arbitrary and unimpaired, has accumulated rights to air, sea, and underground, its rivals set aside by enactment. A landscape has been emptied for the individual to fill with constructions, as bold and highly organised as they can manage. The quality of language is that air gives way in whichever way you push it. For the onlooker, everything has become symptomatic: the limits of the work show the limits of the poet's energy, as the secret core of

fatigue, creativity, hope, is blown up and ruthlessly externalised in a totalized readability. Performance implies competition and assets. In an earlier period, and probably outside England, the poet used a language associated with the court or local nobility, and recorded the deeds and feelings and possessions of those people. The poem acquired a value from real social power. In an individualist society, the stress of the poem is all loaded on the individual; the reader makes up the values (of the style and feelings of the poem) freely and arbitrarily. The contemporary poet cannot make do with original variations on inherited norms, but has to make up and learn the procedures by which the poem is generated. The choice of procedures is arbitrary—but can be good or bad. The poem is self-referential—a circularity which, used as a unit structure, may be as robust as Flemish bond in bricks. The poem is ‘validated’ by tests—which readers impose and which are themselves circular and self-referential.

We asked poets to give close and prolonged attention to their own texts. Attention is a pure good. What brings states of high attention, is successful as art without further ado. It is perverse to try and prove that someone’s attention was misdirected. No, reading something is misdirected because of the states of inattention, somnolence, blur, which it induced. There is a circularity in the situation where someone perceives something vividly because they are in a high attentional state, and are in a highly attentive state because they perceive a cognitive object or set vividly. I believe this circle is at the core of poetry, and there is nothing to be gained by tearing it open and spilling its contents. Social cueing is central to these heightened states—humans copy the eagerness of other humans. The poet is someone with unusual control of the subliminal cues which set off emotional states. Identification, belonging, attention, and boundaries are related concepts, in an area subject to *skill*.

One of the features of the poetry scene is a dual optic. Readers behave differently towards poets (and their utterances) depending on whether they regard the poet as part of their in-group or not. Complicity is close to the circularity we have just noted. Grounds for criticising the intense identification of a reader with a poet are weak. The goal of poetry is to achieve complicity—shared attention to real or symbolic objects. It is unrealistic to aim for a unified optic which simultaneously is with the poet and not-with them. We believe more in the existence of finite optics, and of borders between them as fascinating transit zones. Conflict is traditionally a source of lyric poetry. There are reasons for thinking that good poems are found where two frames of perception

meet. What a problem must ensue when we come to talk about the experience afterwards. This sharing may simply fail to work.

Poets may ask themselves technical questions, but the main question for them is 'how can I make this poem wonderful?', and the more answers they find, the more often they ask the question. The question for the interview is then 'why is your poetry so wonderful'. This turns on powerful inhibitions, and many of the poets fall dumb at this point. The interview has to find a path of indirect questions which may allow the poet to speak.

Marion Milner's wonderful book *On Not Being Able to Paint* talks about the drawings she made (while unable to *paint*) and gives the stories she wrote down to explain the drawings: 'that yellow cliff on the left with its curious lines like hieroglyphic writing, it makes me think of Cleopatra's needle [...] in the bulge of the cliff, is a shape like [...] the flint heart in that fairy tale[.]' It turns out the milling equipment is there to break down the cliff, as the substance of rational authority, and turn it into a drink which she swallows. This kind of simultaneous interpretation points away from the usefulness of theory: there is no general story which fits every poem, rather art is a breakout into an uncoded universe where meaning is free and is generated by the processes of consciousness at every step, in a resistless flow. The objects are not the same as the meanings, and the poem may point to something larger than itself.

Some of the information found in the interviews adds to the poems, or to the images found inside them, like Milner's stories. The words go together to exclude some possibilities, but do not cut the meanings down to a single one. This loss of constraint may bear a structural relationship to the excess load of constraint characterising the poem at other levels of organisation: a line of verse has to pass various tests to be properly poetic. Perhaps the soaring release of the semantic level is hidden behind this constraint, which protects it.

A key failing of certain poets is perhaps their belief that introducing objects ties down and stabilises the poem, the irrefutability of the objects making the poem itself irrefutable (and authentic): whereas the meaning of objects is freely assigned and constantly re-assigned. Objects are common in symbolic discourse because they can be *assigned* meanings. Human beings give time to their objects because they are pliable to human purposes. Then, a cliff is something you can drink.

Readers may actually resent the idea that a poem does not unwrap itself ready for consumption. They could object to poet interviews, for

this reason. Perhaps the stories the poets provide are better than the stories which other people, for whatever reasons, tell about them.

The topic of procedures appears in several interviews. This is something little understood by poets under 40. There seems to have been a division of assets, whereby the conceptual set of ideas have been cherished and made central by visual artists, but have disappeared from the collective memory of poetry. But without a grasp of the procedural approach it is impossible to understand poets like Andrew Crozier and Allen Fisher. Searching for autobiographical situations which would explain the configuration of poems like *Place Book I* can lead to the creation of mountains of conjectural and wrong interpretations.

I have to say that the jackets of books are systematically unreliable. This wouldn't matter if there were decent reviews too. As things stand, the blurb texts make the landscape even more treacherous—pitted with lies, disinformation, disbelief, pseudo-events. If you tell the truth (about a wonderful book) it *sounds like* the lies on book jackets; familiar and used up.

Rigour is the vehicle which takes the poet to an unheard of and transformed landscape. But the poet has to transcend themselves—suspending this internal rigour in order to admire, accurately, other sets of procedures.

Because diversity causes incomprehension, cultural managers have wanted to eliminate diversity. The most authoritative and institution-alised critics have striven to eliminate everything except one central, crushed tradition of 'Englishness' 'common sense' 'littleness' 'irony'. Having rooted out ambiguity, they then wonder where the poetry has gone to. The lack of consensus is why we have to go back to primary witnesses—interviews where poets speak for themselves.

Peter Ryan's framework, then, gives us a context in which it would be quite undesirable to look for convergent patterns in the interviews. Something we could have researched—but didn't, for reasons you now know—was whether this divergence and scatter have increased since 1976–8, when Ryan was doing his research. My belief is that it has. I certainly don't anticipate that the balkanized environment which Eric Homberger complained of, around that time, is going to turn back into an empire—that the scattered shells are going to re-form into one heavenly dome. No, no, my message is 'learn Serbo-Croat'.

It is difficult to go through the experience of your 'size' shooting up and down all the time. What we call paranoia would be a quite common response. That is, someone is paranoid in a limited context, not about

the whole of life. *Scurra* is a kind of minstrel, a performer of poetry. Maybe the scurrilous is a vital function of poets. The terrible truth is that, if you record a thousand scurrilous stories about the scene, a lot of truth is in them, and material you don't get from any other angle. I really enjoy those stories. Rowlandson and Hogarth are not simply distorting reality—their gaze pierces right to the core. Breton's description (in the incomplete *Third Surrealist Manifesto*) of Dali as 'Avida Dollars' is a brilliant moment, a proof that the surreal is more real than the real. But there are convincing reasons for not putting these tales into print. High quality information must come first. Scurrility provokes damaging loyalty contests in which groups polarise and form gangs. They turn cruelty into the most admired act, the one most often recalled in gossip and anecdote.

Ryan does not say why the phenomena he discusses should be seen as a system. Would this not suggest something where the parts relate to each other and are somehow different from what is happening outside them? It may be better to think of an ocean of speech, mutating and self-generating, of which some parts are written down and classified as poetry. This speech ocean would be like photography. A camera gives someone the power to record snatches of the visible but does not lock them into a system of 'photographic art'. Most of the innovations in 20th century poetry have been aimed at making the medium quicker and easier to use—like cameras. There are so many gates which the medium has gone through to exit into a wide and boundless plain; and so few rectifiers, where individuals pass through and become more like each other. Does it really make sense to discuss 'poetry' separately from speech in general, from its subject matter, from the speech networks the poets are listening and speaking inside? Does it make sense to put, say Allen Fisher, Peter Redgrove, and Robert Crawford into one category, as if there were some poem-base which they are all writing variations on?

Ryan's thesis has interviews with poets born roughly 1905 to 1942, and a restricted description of the present book is, interviews with poets born 1936 to 1973. Although there are 'clusters of ideas in the air and informing cultural decisions', and these are temporary, we are wary of leaping from that to saying that everyone going through a formative phase in 1980 went through the same cluster of ideas. Given that poets hang out in small groups, it is worth looking for possible similarities based on closeness in space; and the interviews go into the scenes in particular towns in some detail.

TIM ALLEN INTERVIEWED BY ANDREW DUNCAN

Get the Lute, Go Up the Soak

from Sea Exchange

Come and sea what I'm doing

Kingdom of the shoreline—bountiful and solemn

Between high and low watermark my solemn and seductive

kingdom delicately scrapes

Cramp (severe), title (clichéd), grit (untrue)

Amphibian syntax flows, looks up

Your dream was of a scruffy shambles (a realism made of

newspaper)

Zimmerman was a zephyr and the zephyr was zebra meat

A California populated by fire extinguishers where fridges suffer

multiple strokes

Deluxe algae gesticulating at quarrelling Red-Cross and St John's

Ambulance camps

An underneath *a* egg an even larger ego makes do—mesmeric

and sober

Endurance swimmer's digits in splints of sprinting dust—well,
the logistics of dust

A body in a sack is the only subject in this kingdom

Smell the tower of scrambled egg and rank towels from a
different downstairs

Left Althusser on the seawall then went home to study an
alternative edge

Stiff neat and a morsel dissimilar I mothballed myself while
hallucinogenic wars raged

I've a garden a yard a garage a drive a pond a lake a sea a hard-
standing but no house

The beaches in this garden are an isomorphic commonwealth
From the ledge of silver lining a wreck watches what I'm doing
on the ledge of golden braid

Out of my own reach I sack my own adjectival city (mutinous
wistful rags)

Ages ago in the ancient of days when ridiculous creatures
attacked each other's beds

Animals and their friends—wings abstract and eyes hefty

Patience of minutes and hours then sudden storm of dishonesty
After-dinner speech and maggots

Clouds of livestock rise darken and piss things down—on us

Rude realm of frozen white rum mistaken for vodka-in-a-basket

DUNCAN This is poetry quite heavy on procedures, and I think it would be helpful to be as explicit as possible. Can you tell us about these procedures?

ALLEN Andrew, that is probably one of the most difficult questions you could possibly have opened with because for me a procedure is a way of witnessing control, it is not a question of having any real control yourself and that turns the 'explicit' into a secret, secret even to me. On the surface however, among the multiplicity of possible procedures, I choose one, and the realisation of that, the pausing between one poem and the next, is enough to move me away from any notion of the naturally spontaneous as a pre-determined frame and move towards the idea that a more programme-orientated poetic procedure could shape the frame in which the spontaneous could breathe and come to life. But it was never that self-conscious, and there's the problem. I always was instinctively procedural, the difference was that as a young poet I fantasised an authorial power over what I was writing but when I got older it amused me greatly to discover such a gap between what I thought I was doing and what actually appeared on the page. Ironically, it was that realisation that exerted a small, yet highly significant, degree of control and that came in the form of arbitrary, yet clearly defined, procedures. Now, 99% of what I write fits into one procedural frame or another. For example in my *Settings* sequence I lay out a set of rules which included writing roughly a half-page of A4 in prose paragraphs which would each contain some philosophic (Pataphysic if you like) question/s written down as a quite obvious and careless verbalisation. These would be 'set' against other things, real things, unreal things, meanings, unmeanings. The aim was to entertain myself and feel good by producing a block of word-art that looked like every other block of word-art. They look like prose poems, probably smell like them too, but I don't consider them as such because if they are prose poems then they are bad prose poems, and I happen to think they are quite wonderful.

DUNCAN I think the publication record may be a bit incomplete. Can you talk us through your work as written? Give us a guide?

ALLEN Publication record? That's a laugh. A spineless little book appeared in '95, *Texts For A Holy Saturday*, published by Phlebas, the same imprint that published people like Martin Hibbert and A.C. Evans, and *The Cruising Duct*, published by Andy Brown's Maquette in '98, before he went mainstream. Otherwise it is just a flurry—blizzard if

I'm counting—of magazine appearances through the mid 90s. The only things I've had published recently have been on poetry web-zines: Ethan Paquin's *Slope* (USA), Rupert Loydell's *Stride*, David Bircumshaw's *Chide's Alphabet* and John Mingay's *Raunchland* site etc. The vast bulk of my work remains unpublished in any form, quite simply because, apart from that flurry I mentioned, I do not send my work out. It is not so simple to explain why that is though. Back in the 70s I began submitting to magazines but I only chose the biggies, *London Magazine* etc., and the few exotic avant garde names I discovered, an important one being *Alembic*, edited by a young man just off the plane from Gibraltar called Ken Edwards. I got a very encouraging response from Ken who directed me to some of the more proto-surrealist mags but I never followed through. One of the problems was that at the time I was writing very little, doodling with concrete stuff, writing a haiku a month etc, in addition to which all my energy was going into schools' football and teaching long division. Through my teens I had written reams but when I hit my 20s it came to a stop and didn't start again properly until around 1980 when I reached my 30s. I then wrote a lot but I had absolutely no interest at the time in seeking publication; that always seemed to be something for the future or something that wasn't really my concern. But when I started having things published in magazines in the 90s I thought it was great. I was getting published in things like *Memes*, *Ramraid Extraordinaire*, *10th Muse*, *First Offence* etc. but after a while the thrill wore off, and many of those magazines closed down too. By the late 90s I had become thoroughly unimpressed by the majority of little magazines around, all dominated by the domestic realism of the New Poetic, and I lost my enthusiasm again. The only ones my work occasionally appeared in then were *Oasis* and *Shearsman*. Ian Robinson was very enthusiastic about my work and wanted to publish a collection of my prose poems but I didn't get them organised. Then he was going to publish *Sea ExChange* but the poem became too big. Then he died. He was a lovely man and he did so much for poets and poetry—very sad.

DUNCAN I appreciate this may tend to pack everything safely back inside a biographical narrative, but I'm curious to know how you got to this realm, certainly rather far away from most English poetry of the day. How did you get there?

ALLEN I got there principally through an early obsession with surrealism and a consequent love of modern French poetry in translation. This was tempered later by ancient Chinese and American post-modernism. I always loved the strange, the surprising. Rimbaud was to blame. I think around 1966 I bought the Penguin Rimbaud and Alvarez' *The New Poetry* within weeks of each other and there was no contest. I was doomed. This is not to say that I was not impressed by Hughes, Plath and co., I certainly was, still am, but nothing they wrote got to me in the same way as Rimbaud (or Oliver Bernard actually) writing, 'On the slope of the bank, angels turn their robes of wool in pastures of steel and emerald.' There were many reasons for that of course, conditioners: catholic childhood, the Isle of Portland where I was brought up, my rebellious Irish mother, red in hair and politics. Before that my imagination had been focussed by science fiction, or what we were calling Speculative Fiction back then; I used to send short stories to Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* and get lovely chatty rejection letters from him saying that I was basically writing poems, not stories. So around that time, I was a 16 year old working in W.H. Smiths in Weymouth, I made two 'bad' choices as a writer, I moved away from S.F. into poetry and in poetry I was swept away from the fast mainstream into the nutrient rich but isolated dark pools of foreign modernism. And basically I stuck with it, because I had found something that matched my inner life.

DUNCAN Don't think the name Zimmerman is there by accident (at start of *Sea ExChange*). Let me cite 'Yeah heavy and a bottle of bread' ('Call zoot get a mute and go and catch a trout'.) Am I right to think of Blonde on Blonde, the Basement Tapes, and that whole free-association period around 1966-8?

Sea ExChange seems quite close to oral procedures—autonomous phrases which could be made up by musicians in an improvised exchange, for example. Each line is lavishly unpredictable with respect to the previous one, but also there is some kind of flow of mood. Maybe we could shed light on it by discussing the opposite kind of poetry, where each line is locked to the previous one in a situation, and the situation is locked in place by a whole notion of social realism and conventions of behaviour, a kind of closed circuit of increasing predictability.

ALLEN First, you are right, Zimmerman is not there by accident; the entire poem, the poem as it was before it was written if you like, is 'concerned' with one of Dylan's songs. I say 'concerned' but it isn't really the right word, I haven't got the right word for it. And yes, that free-association period of his was very important for me, big entertainment . . . I was going to say 'and big influence' but that would not be right either, there was too much of a parallel to be influenced. What I was though was curious, not about where it was coming from, I understood that, I was curious to know where it was going, in the sense of its poetry—what sort of a poetry could actually be developed from that etc? I remember reading an article by Lee Harwood back in the mid 70s in which he talked about the redundancy of still writing surrealist poetry in the manner of the 1930s, about how he was looking for new ways to carry on such projects. I agreed strongly and in Lee's own work and Raworth's and Ashbery's I experienced such examples for the first time. I realised I was not alone, I had cousins, but nevertheless I had to find my own way and *Sea ExChange*, written some 20 years later, was the culmination of that going alone. So, as you pointed out earlier, I ended up writing a very different poetry to that being written in Britain today, the distance between something like *Sea ExChange* and the stuff that wins T.S. Eliot prizes cannot be exaggerated. Yet, ironically, there was a time in the mid 80s when I was actually writing some things that were not too far removed from what the early Northern School were up to, so I think I understand, even appreciate it to an extent. Whether such poetry is, as you call it, the opposite of what I do, I am not sure. Can there be an opposite of such things? Even when you say that 'each line is locked to the previous one in a situation' I wonder, because in a sense so are mine, but not 'locked' in the same way of course. However, when you say that in such poetry, 'the situation is locked in place by a whole notion of social realism and conventions of behaviour, a kind of closed circuit of increasing predictability' I have to agree, though I think there is a problem with the term social realism. The trouble is, I do not think there is anything inherently wrong in a poem being 'locked in place by a whole notion', whatever the notion is of, and neither do I find anything inherently wrong in a closed circuit. My problem with such poetry is more to do with the predictability itself, and what I see as a bad faith within the poetic, resulting in either a flawed finished prod-

uct or a paltry one. From my point of view the flaw is more to do with the ideology of transparency that lurks behind the material than with the mechanics of the material itself. I actually consider modern British mainstream poetry to be the anomaly, stunted growth etc—what I write is normal, as obvious to me as cheese.

DUNCAN What poetry are you working on at the moment?

ALLEN Recently I've been working on a new sequence, provisionally titled *The Failure of Myth*, in which I find myself dealing with the politics of popular music along with the philosophical problem posed by our co-existence with animals. However, those subjects are not there for their own sake—though everything is for its own sake in a sense, that's where its concrete value lives—but they are there as things that give access to my on-going critique of cool human value, cool in the sense of *birth of the cool* etc. I never approach anything directly—I'm a crab. But I'm also still trying to complete/fine-tune a number of long poems I've been working on for the last decade. They are all problematic for one reason or another, for example there is a poem called *Glitches and Quicksand* which arose out of my negative engagement with post-modernism, especially regarding political anger and the impossibility of redressing injustice—Ben Watson read a huge chunk out on his Resonance FM programme—I was really chuffed. Its structure is similar to *Sea ExChange* in that it uses discrete lines but unlike *Sea ExChange* it uses quasi repetition: the same basic packet of words is exhausted by shuffling them into every possible order, whereas in *Sea ExChange* the opposite happens, the same image is constantly shuffled into fresh words—which is where your earlier comment about jazz is relevant.

DUNCAN Because the home of language is inside social networks, I'm curious to find out about social networks around poetry. We may have heard a little too much about the groups in London and Cambridge. We'll get on to 'distance' networks in a minute. But, can you talk about the Plymouth scene? There seems to be a lot going on down there.

ALLEN Coincidence, that's all. I came to live and work in Plymouth as a Primary School teacher, Norman Jope was born and brought up

here and Steve Spence arrived at some point etc. People do things and then things start to happen. The difference in this case was that although on the outside the things we did were no different to any other provincial grouping—poetry circle, discussions, performances in local hall, magazines—, on the inside we were all coming from somewhere else; our tastes and enthusiasms were not staple fare. We all had working-class backgrounds, were obsessed with poetry, never had academic jobs, took our writing very seriously, none of us considered it a hobby for example, and we all had a healthy disrespect for the cut and colour of Andrew Motion's ironed jeans.

There are other circumstances though which gave our mini social group an edge; Plymouth is not a cultural city, it is predominantly working class and its history is tied up with the Navy and defence, so it is essentially a 'conservative' working-class city. It therefore does not have a large enough liberal-minded middle-class to sustain, with any strength, the kinds of literary groups which would act as on-going filterers of current establishment poetic fashions, values and concerns. Its middle class is large enough to support a theatre and numerous drama and music groups, but poetry is a minority sport here as everywhere else, so when Kenny Knight and myself took over the reins of the only poetry group in town, the Swarthmore Poets, in 1990, we had a bit of a fight on our hands but nothing too dramatic, as, to put it simply, mainstreamers with any gumption were too thin on the ground. The other factor is the West Country itself, both with regard to its idiosyncrasies and its distance from London and the North. Distances are psychological as well as geographical, they tend to make people think they are different even when they aren't: whatever was happening in London tended to happen here five years after and the whole movement of poetry through the 90s was centred on the North anyway, even further away. The west country is rural, for a long time now it has acted as a magnet for a certain mind-set wanting to move out of the smoke so its scattered literati are more inclined to be New Age sympathisers with a bent towards the mystical than they are to be street-wise rappers or theoretical avants—most of this is thin coating but such thin coating does its job, people act out roles, and in the end it comes down to numbers. So in a place like Plymouth, an urban island in all this, we actually get a very good mix of different poetics without

any being dominant. In some places that can lead to bland neutrality but one of the things our organisations have fostered here, first through the Poetry Exchange and now with The Language Club, is a kind of hard-edged eclectic dynamic that tends to dramatise and have fun with difference; similar, though less confrontational, to what I did with *Terrible Work* on a larger scale.

DUNCAN Can you shed light on the history of poetry in the south-west? What was happening down there in the 60s, or the 70s?

ALLEN I have no idea about the 60s. I know that in the early 70s things started happening in Bridport, Dorset, around Elsa Corbluth—they published a poem by my mate David. At some point *Westwords* appeared, edited from Plymouth by David Woolley and, more importantly, *South West Review*, which at different times was edited by Owen Davis and Ken Smith, before Smith hit it relatively big time. *South West Review* was published from Exeter and had Arts Council funding. It provided a good sampling of that eclectic mix I mentioned above but at the time I perceived it as middle class mild artiness smeared with the quirky, which is very unfair I know, especially as it was probably the first place I read work by the likes of Maggie O’Sullivan. To be honest I didn’t take much notice. Looking back now I can see why such magazines lacked focus, it was because there wasn’t one, the thing was too diffuse. In the late 80s and 90s the main New Age focus was centred around Gloucestershire with Jay Ramsay and in the east of the region a lot of magazines appeared around a kind of artificial ‘south’ thing but talking about that will lead us into the messy issues around Andy Jordan’s ‘archetypical poetry’ scam and ‘Charles Mintern’. Today there is relative richness: Shearsman, Stride, etruscan. There are other scenes of course: Harry Chambers with his mainstream publishing enclave, Peterloo, but we might as well be at different ends of the country for all the contact we’ve had. Then there’s *Acumen* magazine, but again, contact is minimal—Patricia Oxley said my work was on a different planet. The Apples and Snakes performance crew have set up shop here recently too, so there is some energy, though I think of it as electricity going through a dummy. And there’s Dartington . . . ummm, where you put a promising young writer in at one end and get something strange, shiny and unusable out the other. Hey, don’t print that . . . some people don’t have a sense of humour.

DUNCAN *Terrible Work* struck me as a very broad-spectrum magazine in which, rather evidently, your receptive capability was many miles broader than your active predilections as a poet. The 'lines of division' are much on people's minds just now, and will predetermine, for one thing, the way this book is received and even the way most people will choose not to read it. How did you and Steve Spence bring this off with *Terrible Work*, and how do you feel about polarisation?

ALLEN *Terrible Work's* 'broad-spectrum' was relative, there were plenty of people around who considered it anything but broad-spectrum, but yes, from my perspective it was certainly eclectic, and purposely so. From the beginning I did not want it to be an avant garde ghetto. I was dismayed by what I saw at the time as the closed-shop attitude of the British avant garde which was in danger of dying out through excessive in-breeding. Young poets especially were almost entirely ignorant of it and excluded from it and yet they were actually looking for alternative models and tracks which could give them the confidence to fend off the influence of the Northern School on one hand and the starry-eyed neoplatonists on the other. There was a lot of wasted energy too, in young poets reinventing the wheel by doing things which they thought were radical and original but were in fact staple modernist old-hat. The atomisation of the British poetry scene went very deep yet there was no hint of it in most of the commentaries and even those who were in a position to know didn't seem to care, as long as their corner was doing OK. I include most academics in that by the way. So I wanted *Terrible Work* to expose these gaps both in its choice of material and in its reviewing. I wanted to find out what was going on out there and bring it into the magazine: S.F. poetry came in, Redgroviaan stuff, the best (I hope) of what the new-agers were up to, the more quirky edge of the Northern School, the more extreme end of the bed-sit depressives, the more politically aware and/or lexically adventurous of the urban bards, neglected hippy rants, rave generation ecstasies, unabashed lyrical poets struggling with the post-modern condition and even mainstream poems that I thought worked—*Terrible Work* gave Sophie Hannah one of her first ever platforms. And of course there was the material that, within this clash, was beginning to shine and stand out above the rest, let's use those quaint

terms, 'linguistically innovative' and 'post-language'. Looking back now I can see we were gradually sloughing off some tendencies and concentrating on others but even by the final issue in 2000 the scope was unusual for a magazine considered, by then, to be experimental. I think *Terrible Work* did manage to pull-off what it intended, but at a price, and part of that price was paid by it ceasing to exist in its hard-copy poetry publishing form.

As for what I feel about polarisation, I'm all for it, as long as people can see the poles and have the occasional twirl around them. Is that too flippant? What I want is openness, honesty; we cannot solve the problems of atomisation by putting up the barricades or pretending to play happy federal families. I have found myself out on a limb as far as these things are concerned as most poetry people are either too happy to keep within their home territory, either aggressively or benignly, or they act-out a false homogeneity, especially out of career considerations. I want debate, not patronisation.

DUNCAN I suspect if I knew more about recent American poetry I would find your poetry easier to assimilate. As this is probably the key issue in infrastructure just now, can you talk to us about 'distance networks'? How did you discover the modern poetry which means most to you? Where do you buy this kind of thing? Do you publish in American magazines?

ALLEN Due to preoccupation with my family and job I lost touch with the more interesting things being written in the late 70s and 80s and because of that I missed out on the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E explosion in the US. I was aware of the new British things to an extent, had read some Prynne and Doug Oliver for example; I was impressed and curious to know more but not exactly galvanised—when your head is full of Henri Michaux and Li Ho even the Cambridge School can seem a little tame. Then in 1990 an anthology edited by Andrei Codrescu dropped into my hands, *American Poetry Since 1970 (4 Walls 8 Windows, New York 1989)*. I found it fascinating, there wasn't a page that didn't thrill. It documented brilliantly the slide from late Beat through the later-New York School into Talk poetry and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. As I mentioned earlier, I wrote almost continually through the 80s, note books that look like jigsaws made of ink, but I had actually come to a

formal impasse and was consciously casting around for clues. The effect of reading the American work was immediate and profound. I discovered poets who were doing similar things to myself but with such confidence and with such a high rate of aesthetic success, and they had been doing it for well over a decade. One of the striking differences was the self-consciousness and reflexivity of the poetry and within seconds of reading some of it I had answers to questions that had been niggling for ages. Much of that was to do with issues of reference and non-reference, though I didn't pay much attention to the theoretics because it was obvious what was going on in the work itself. It also helped me to sort out questions of form, even something as basic as the line break. And on the more philosophic side for the first time I was encountering what seemed like a genuine materialist poetics in the English language. So that was how I 'discovered the modern poetry' that means most to me, my list begins with Hejinian and Silliman and then goes on and on.

Three other things happened at the same time. Firstly my understanding of cultural theory matured; I had been reading continental philosophers for years—I read Barthes and Althusser in the early 70s for example—but suddenly it was all coming together and I was joining up the dots. I was also in the process of having a serious work-related breakdown, which finally happened in '93, forcing me out of my 9to5 profession. Thirdly, by that point I was also using a computer to write, which shifted notions of composition. And of course you cannot edit a magazine without networking, so I was already making long-distance contacts with Europe and the States and the floodgates opened. Scarcity was replaced by glut, a situation that was compounded some seven years later by e-mail and my introduction to the web. From the beginning I was astonished by the amount of work being published in America; I shouldn't have been, after all it's a big place, but it was overwhelming and a strict regime of filtering had to take place. Also, an old inferiority complex was reignited and the only hard-copy American magazine my work appeared in, to my knowledge, was *Lost and Found Times*, and that was a request from the editor. I never submitted anything, but then, I never got around to submitting anything to *Angel Exhaust* this side of the water either. My ambition has always been healthily tempered by the fact that I'm a lazy sod.