

The Council of Heresy

See where they squat behind the escarpment
Ignorant of metre, of faction and schism,
Destined by favourless Fortune to be the true
Heirs of the Kingdom.

—Anthony Thwaite
'Letters of Synesius' Letter VI

Also by Andrew Duncan:

Poetry

In a German Hotel

Cut Memories and False Commands

Sound Surface

Alien Skies

Pauper Estate

Switching and Main Exchange

Anxiety before Entering a Room, new and selected poems

Surveillance and Compliance

Skeleton Looking at Chinese Pictures

The Imaginary in Geometry

Savage Survivals (amid modern suavity)

Criticism

The Poetry Scene in the Nineties (internet only)

Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry

The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry

Origins of the Underground

Fulfilling the Silent Rules (forthcoming)

As editor:

Don't Stop Me Talking (with Tim Allen)

Angel Exhaust (magazine: 1992–98 and 2005–)

Joseph Macleod: *Cyclic Serial Zeniths from the Flux*

The Council of Heresy

—A Primer of Poetry in a Balkanised Terrain—

Andrew Duncan

Shearsman Books
Exeter

Published in the United Kingdom in 2009 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

ISBN 978-1-84861-007-1
First Edition

Copyright © Andrew Duncan, 2009.

The right of Andrew Duncan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved.

Cover: 'A storm approaches Clavel Tower, Dorset' © 2006 by Blackbeck Photographic.

Acknowledgements

Some of the essays appeared in earlier versions as follows: 'Goodbye to Eric Mottram' was published in *Angel Exhaust*; 'The past as damage: Tom Raworth' was published in different form in *Angel Exhaust*; 'The mythical history of Northumbria: Barry MacSweeney' was published in *Salzburg Poetry Review*; 'In the House of the Shaman' was published in *Angel Exhaust*; 'Siren Furnaces Blow Infirm Metals' was published in the *CCCP Review*; 'From oracle to dialectic: Kelvin Corcoran' was published in *Salzburg Poetry Review*; part of 'Deep Politics' was published by Shearsman online at www.shearsman.com.

For quotations made in the essays, we are grateful to the following: Allen Fisher, Tony Lopez, D.S. Marriott and Maggie O'Sullivan for permission to quote from their published poems; Brian Keeble, literary executor for the Estate of Kathleen Raine, for permission to quote from Kathleen Raine's out-of-print or unpublished writings; Golgonooza Press (U.K.) and Counterpoint Press (U.S.A.) for permission to reprint work from *The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine*, copyright © 2001 by Kathleen Raine; Enitharmon Press for permission to quote from Anthony Thwaite's *Collected Poems*; Anthony Thwaite for permission to quote extracts from the poem 'The Pine Processionary' from his collection *Inscriptions*—this poem was commissioned as a film commentary by BBC2 for *Horizon*; Faber & Faber, London, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, for permission to quote from *All Day Permanent Red* by Christopher Logue; Anvil Press Poetry for permission to quote from the poems 'Coloured Mansion 1474', 'Doctrines', 'Who Left the Door Open' and 'She Passes Through the Poem', published in *Throw Out the Life Line / Lay Out the Corse: Poems, 1965–85* (Anvil Press Poetry, London, 1983); Bloodaxe Books for permission to quote from two poems contained in Barry MacSweeney's *Wolf Tongue: Selected Poems 1965–2000* (Bloodaxe Books, Tarnet, 2000), and also to the Estate of Barry MacSweeney for permission to quote both from that volume, and from uncollected work; Carcanet Press for permission to quote two poems by Tom Raworth from *Collected Poems* (Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2003).

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
The Balkan Landscape	13
Towards a Primer of the Avant-Garde	23
Leaders of Heresies: Eric Mottram and Kathleen Raine	67
The Decline of Political Poetry: Christopher Logue	92
Tango of Gematria: Asa Benveniste	98
From Cluster I: Anthony Thwaite	103
Tom Raworth: The Past as Damage	112
The Mythical History of Northumbria: Barry MacSweeney	125
Tony Lopez: Worrying in Public	142
From Oracle to Dialectic: Kelvin Corcoran	146
Sirens	154
Uncoded Sound	174
Emptiness, the infinite, and the spiral	190
The Avant-garde and East Mediterranean Cults	200
Contamination Chamber	220
Hyperliterate; or Not Quite	230
Objects, Abstraction, and a Head for Height	238
Shamanism is not Anglicanism	253
Juju! Magog! Hobgob! Dabra!: Maggie O'Sullivan	265
Deep Politics	275
The Assizes of Conceit: Afterword	289
Pages from the Orthodox Map	
Prosopography	297
Balkan gazetteer for the period 1945–1997	301
Index	309

THE COUNCIL OF HERESY

Introduction

How do we grasp incomprehension? It slides away from us as we advance towards it, and winks out of view at the instant that we shed light on it. All the same the task of a prose work about poetry, such as this one, is to move into the area of maximum incomprehension and try to reduce it. Evidently the act of reading a poem is not always attended by understanding. There is a sort of sound like the sound of a needle skidding across a gramophone record which points to a failed literary experience. What seems to make it skid is a fluff-ball made up of the obscurity of the poet, the lack of cultural experience of the ordinary reader, and the malice of poetry world insiders distracted by jealousy and pre-existing alliances. To dissolve this complex, we need to apply diverse techniques at the same time. We will try to construct an overall map which puts poets in relation to each other, to discuss special and recent literary techniques or verbal games, to expound certain unusual theories about the universe used by some poets, as well as describing the work of a dozen individual poets.

The present work is, inevitably, a mile-long span spanning a two-mile river and is part of a series of six books on the period 1960–97 which have tried to track the radical expansion of scope of British poetry. The recurring theme of this volume is depolarisation. My preference would be for hostility to decrease, and for certain inherited feuds to end in a truth and reconciliation process. The idea of orthodoxy is present as an ideal, a state which you can reach once disinformation has been swept away. We are trying also to conduct an argument about heresy and whether radical originality is destructive of a shared literary culture or the greatest achievement of 20th-century literature.

Much of the information available around the scene is the product of malice. The issue may be less of Baroque obscurity in elaborate texts than of acts of disinformation by conservative cultural managers tangled up in alliances with other cultural managers. Where two people want exactly the same thing, they may be deadly rivals. In fact, fighting with someone may be evidence that you are similar to them. Poetic malice is not vitally dependent on differences of any kind, including political and stylistic ones. I have chosen not to discuss it because I think it is very well understood

already. I feel in a good position to explain one faction to another. This volume is an attempt to set down the knowledge of expert readers, but also to expose the shadow knowledge, and to encourage a new era of openness and forgiveness.

The first non-heretical proposal is that poetry is born in cliques but is truly successful only when the poet's rivals admit that it is good. I set out as everyone's rival, with the ambition that the poets should recognise the descriptions as fair even when they feel themselves underrated. A second orthodox rule has to do with the difference between what is within a poet's fiat and what is not. The intention of the poem is a voluntary act by the poet, in an essentially arbitrary regime. Intention is as free as tyranny. The value of a poem is, though, something which other people have a vote on. A poem exists in a geography of successively less internal and more exterior zones. There is a question of ownership here, traced by finely shifting boundaries. The path of externalisation is difficult but is crucial to writing, may indeed be the principal part of the writer's task. Another rule we have to insist on is that a meaning which is inadequately externalised is not truly a poem, although it may include words and represent a lump of subjectivity. Obscurity is not pure autonomy. A poet can be the prime witness of what they want but they are not a privileged witness to issues belonging to a shared realm: for example, whether they are original, whether they are obscure, who they are similar to. The last one invokes much disagreement. Poets want almost more than anything else to be compared to other poets, but only the ones they choose. The ones they wish to resemble may not at all be the ones they resemble. The poet Luis Cernuda said that what people dislike about you may be the most significant thing about you, the thing you can least afford to lose. So also for poets who they resemble is crucial.

The equipment of orthodoxy must include the value of the descriptive terms with which we describe the poets, to be supported by definitions which the informed community would agree on. It's clear that other poets are the most accurate reference points and that comparison is more evocative than words like classical, rhetorical, pop, anti-classical, sensitive, etc. So the problem of establishing poetic groupings is on the direct path to making maps that tell you where you are. Some groupings are on the

Map pages at the end of the book. The construction of a map which dares to put poets near to the poets they are near to is bound to arouse outrage at the same time that it helps with rational discussion of disagreements. The project is to establish a set of shared artistic facts about the period, not to continue warfare.

Much of the hostility towards the very idea of a common map comes from a history of treating poets as groups—i.e. writing them off as groups. Justice requires an examination of the behaviour of individuals. This makes the process slow. The “information universe” of poetry includes the vital knowledge about several hundred individuals as a minimum. We can only look at a few in this session. I only have time to write about each poet once. This volume includes poets I haven’t written about before. The cultural process involves thousands of people besides me, so I do not have to collect every grain of truth.

We are trying to develop classifiers based on modern practice and not on the 18th Century or Ancient Greece. Old classifiers fail because the inherited genres have collapsed, and for the last half century or so poets have had to invent procedures as well as think up poems. Misunderstanding is possible, and this is another area where we try to help the reader. The information is right there in the text, but preconceptions lock it out. Areas where explanation can help include the procedures for reading a poem; the context of it; and the ideas about lifestyle and politics on which the poem depends. If we explain the procedures, readers can interpret the primary evidence (the texts) for themselves. For poets who use procedures which we can describe either as similar to everyday speech or as similar to 19th century poetry, there is nothing to explain.

Another line of approach is to describe unshared intellectual backgrounds. Much of the book is doing that. The utility of this may be limited to a few poets. This kind of support covers agreed fantasies as well as simply beliefs: many poets write about shamanism, but this is a legitimated temporary identity rather than a proposition about how the universe works. This whole area can also be considered as heresy. (I wonder if it is true that some fantasies can be considered as not legitimate.)

Being released from wrong ideas is a liberation like any other. It is the nature of our brains to be beset by errors, much as plants are

disposed to be beset by hungry parasites. Shedding wrong ideas brings a sensation of health, unity, and freedom. A Council of Heresy might be a process which frees us from bad ideas. I am not interested in putting a cracked pedestal under every crackpot. I believe that there is going to be an orthodox position and this is what I am trying to develop. The idea is a database which everyone agrees on, and which dozens of critics write and populate. But in our society originality is orthodoxy and the poets who fulfil this imperative most fully arouse disagreement. Conjecture is orthodoxy, experiment is orthodoxy, stylization is orthodoxy. Critique of our political system is orthodox. We all have a notion of artistic failure but it is hard to make that notion explicit.

Most of the information of which poetry is made consists of information about people. This information is about free actions but is subject to validation. The key idea in a body of poetic work may be the poet's idea of him—or herself. It follows that the heresies we are concerned with will often be poets' false ideas about themselves. Other data objects are opinions held about a poet by other people. So in fact a large share of the heresies to be adjudicated will be opinions about poets. There is a real chance of uncovering truth here, as the opinions are often based on malice and ignorance. The case would be heard at the Tribunal of Conceit, or the Assizes of Malice and Belittling. We are able to discover the poet's work as direct evidence. Indeed, the poems of poets have a function of making a case.

I have said much less about the lifestyle issues—the area where poetry surrenders to real life, or takes it over. Looking back, most people are glad that the UK did not become a Marxist republic, as some people actively expected in the 1970s. Not every alienated gesture is still interesting today. Yet the threat of the audience being 1,000 miles ahead of them inspired all factions in poetry to go beyond the secure artistic routine and reach a higher level. A literary critic is writing from shared memory, captured in print, and not from within a society we can't live in—or texts that never got written. I am writing about repeatable procedures of reading, and about texts which actually exist and can be retrieved. I was going to say that the upsurge of radical criticism created the levels of mutual alienation.

But that is not quite true—the level of frustration with a conservative English society created the radicalism. Strangely, one of the things we may have to get in touch with, looking back at the recent past, is the level of frustration. The papers submitted to the tribunal will include not only the writings of the poets but also evidence about the society they are rejecting and about their conjectures. The hearing is not going to make much of whatever is incomprehensible, perverse, vengeful, aleatory, which creates an empty space and is then unable to give it features. On the other hand, surely it would grant the classic poets of the 1970s the status they deserve. One possible meaning of a Council of Heresy might be a court which allows due process to occur before reaching a verdict. This might include allowing a thousand people to vote on each decision.

I had doubts about separating politics (ideas about how society ought to work) and lifestyle (images of people living in a certain way, the poet or others). Are these two different things or not? A proportion of poems refer to the state of being of a group of people, we think of that group as we read the poem, and our assessment of the poem is partly an assessment of that group. If a poem contains ideas about the future, we may have to wait 30 years before assessing whether those ideas were good. The problem of evaluating serious poetry is not greatly simpler than the problem of assessing what life in Britain is like. Clearly the council will reach decisions slowly. Simply living our lives as human beings qualifies us to assess what life is like. We can judge whether political ideas are true or false. We are allowed to look at the worlds they refer to. Even poems about a self are not merely self-referential: poets can make right or wrong bets about who to be. I have kept away from this whole area because it is too complicated. If you write boring poetry it quite probably is because your life-style is boring. That is simple, I suppose.

The Council could also be a vast jirga where all the heresies meet and argue their case. I haven't made my mind up. I envisage a Charlatans' Market where Iamblichus, Marx and Lévi-Strauss all have a stall, and we stroll by watching them plying their patter and muffing their miracles. Sun-worshippers, pre-Adamites, post-processualists, Gnostics, nonists, Fifth Monarchy men, Althusserians, sacrators of Basilidian talismans, sound poets, spells for the ears of headless demons . . .

NOTES

Books frequently referred to in this volume are abbreviated as follows: DSMT: *Don't Start Me Talking*, ed. Tim Allen and Andrew Duncan (Cambridge: Salt, 2006); Marvels, *Marvels of Lambeth, interviews with Allen Fisher*, edited Andrew Duncan (Cambridge: Salt, in preparation); FCon, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003); Scene, *The Poetry Scene in the 90s* (published on the Internet at www.pinko.org); Origins, *Origins of the Underground* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008); Silent Rules, *Fulfilling the Silent Rules* (Cambridge: Salt, in preparation).

THE BALKAN LANDSCAPE, OR MULTIPOLAR ORDER

We spoke of bad knowledge—of scurrilous versions of poets, not based on study of their works, shapes sculpted by the plastic force of malice rather than by DNA. You may well say that rivalry is inherent in poetry and that finally, where you have hundreds of poets you have hundreds of kilograms of raw rivalry. I would not set out to disprove this. The poetry scene has been essentially stable in the 35 years I have been involved in it. Nonetheless, the flagrant conflicts that existed in the 1970s are now depolarising, because the positions are obsolete and because the people who occupied them are either different people or actually dead. Even if new demarcation lines are coming into being, the ones I grew up with are dissolving and acts of reconciliation can now take place. We can make an innocent space even if the guilty acts are still in memory.

We worship originality and admire people who break the rules more than almost anything. How then could there be a heresy? Raymond Garlick wrote:

Poetry is communication
If there's need for elucidation
The poem fails to that degree.
(‘Notes for an Autobiography’)¹

As the Welsh poet suggests, the answer is that there are features which are at the gateway before you reach the thoughts of the poem and if these are badly managed the whole process fails and we would then say that the theory underlying it is wrong. That is, where the poet lacks insight into the reader and the information conveyed before and in the poem we can call this heresy. That is, ignorance produces a pattern of ideas, coherent enough to produce a book, which because wrong we define as heretical. For example, in *Odes*² by Barry MacSweeney the text is obscure and impossible to retrieve for most of its length. This obscurity shows a canon of literature, namely that we want to understand what we read. Where this obscurity is systematic we can speak of a heresy.

The information available around a text is so rich and various that we have difficulty capturing it. We have to envisage a human starting at birth with complete ignorance and learning a language and then artistic and behavioural codes of many sorts and grasping the specialised languages

of modern art and then failing in one specific case. Some twinge must be telling us that success is just around the corner in this case too. The code is taught as well as learnt. It is thickly distributed through the poetry itself and through the whole cognitive environment of the late 20th century. The curious reader will succeed by scanning the whole landscape and the effective poet will show not only the message but also the means which carry the message.

The orthodox rule remains that art should be clear and complete. Surely there are unconscious and common rules of language which say:

- follow the state of the listener's knowledge
- remember what is disclosed
- explain what is obscure
- add information which is itself clear
- be coherent
- answer the questions which the listener is going to ask
- use shared rules for constructing utterances
- deploy redundancy to help with difficult parts
- reduce ambiguity by confirming one or other possibility
- strengthen the difficult parts
- avoid contradiction and repetition

and as poetry is a form of language it is also governed by these unconscious and perpetually applied rules, and if it breaks them the effect is that the reader cannot find out what the poem might mean, and the pattern behind the negligent application is a heresy.

We would expect poets to be expert at language and so better at applying these rules more continuously and effectively. Reflexive monitoring of communication is such a basic human behaviour program that to be without it would be bizarre, to be ill even if not heretical. Insight into other people's states of mind is a climax state. Everything else rests on it but it is fragile and depends on intricate and easily perturbed faculties. Clarity does not mean simplicity or vacuity. Obscurity is failure.

Where a reading of a poem fails, there are (at least) two humans involved. We are forced to start from the position that we do not know

which of the two is at fault for the failing. We could even blame third parties. Even the search for an individual to blame may derive from the urgent search for clarity which animates the court system, so that clarity in blame is only a function of a need for clarity. Perhaps there is no need to find fault and to find that someone has to pay. An alternative would be to look at the entire process and possibly find amendments which would improve the process. My assumption is that there are texts which are badly written and so abidingly obscure. I first read *Odes* more than 25 years ago and I am very familiar with the rest of MacSweeney's poetry. The social process by which one acquires insight into people's attitudes and into cultural expressions is continuous and partly unconscious. We need careful observation in order to capture it, as a preliminary to understanding where it goes wrong. A reader who knows nothing about the poetry of the last 50 years is in a weak situation to read a specific volume tomorrow. Poets might be poorly advised to write poetry which is so bare that it can be understood by someone with no background.

The poet and the reader both have their hi tech but home-made equipment but between the two is a third sector which simultaneously resists analysis and prevents communication. This is a sector of infrastructure, a network which distributes the code the poems use and which ideally is common to poet and reader. That is, the poet uses a code but a million other people circulate the code to society in general. That is, a poet may not be obscure all on his own but writes something which is lucid to one group and obscure to others—because the infrastructure has failed. When I “get” a work of art it is simplistic to look at the work of art alone and ignore the 40 years of my cultural life during which I acquired scraps of cultural vocabulary. Where poets and readers are beyond criticism in different ways we can still find fault with the institutions of poetry. We have also to define how they should work.

Moving away from a common language seems to be a move away from a common culture. However, the most original poetry is a product of the same geological forces that produced the whole of the landscape—I am suggesting that everywhere there are imperatives, and the extremes are reached by over-fulfilment of them. Any vector will take us to an extreme unless it is stopped in its tracks. The first question we have to answer, then,

is why don't you want to write exactly like everyone else?

The increase of information and distinctions has given rise to the balkanization of the scene, bemoaned by Eric Homberger in 1977 in *Art of the Real*³. 22 years later, John Matthias, in a significant review article (for the *Electronic Book Review*)⁴, was saying something very similar, and asking for the different sectors of the poetry scene to read each other. He asked why no anthology could unite the many vertexes of the stylistic space. It is balkanisation which leads us towards the overall shape of the period—an uncontrolled growth in the range and amount of poetry being written, which forces individual poets to mutate and differentiate in order to avoid vanishing in a mass of indistinct ideas. This is effortful for the poet—but it's good for the reader.

I suspect that the rule governing acquisition in a society dominated by leisure is that pleasurable activities should last as long as possible. That is, poetry will continue indefinitely to become more complex, and poets will tend, indefinitely, to differentiate from each other. So far as I can see, the clientele enjoy the act of shopping—and want a field which is not visible at a glance. Surely running out of new possibilities is the prospect which fills everyone with dread. The project of prolonging pleasure necessarily implies differentiation. Over decades, this differentiation necessarily implies incomprehensibility to the naive reader.

Journalists like to claim that poets waste time by differing from each other. A typical description of the poetry world by people who don't read poetry is 'endless energy wasted on squabbling'. Unless you see the breakout into self-definition, stylistic freedom, and unknown territory as pride and joy, I think it must make no sense at all. It must seem perverse. People want to stop it happening. I think it has a lot to do with narcissism and exhibition. I can see that it doesn't fit in with an Anglican approach to art—where pride is something you try to purge away.

I know that arts administrators would like poetry to be cut down to one simple, instrumental, utterance like a business plan. I know they would like the variety of magazines, so inefficient, to be cut down to a single one, which they could fund—or cut funding from—with a minimum of paperwork. I realise that they hate something which they can't understand without actually reading it. But to me the differences between poets actually

mean something. More—the offsets are actually the essential fabric of the landscape, a honeycomb of tiny complete domains like a bubble raft. The ‘squabbling’ might just be the sound of poets realising how different they are from each other, and the energy it produces is actually what hurls someone out into boundless unexplored areas. Finicky attention to very slight differences is actually the most productive thing which poets do. The differences between a good poet and a bad poet are hard to detect—since both use largely the same techniques, words, rhythms—and lie in tiny verbal discriminants which journalists consider useless. Bad poems are essentially good copies of good poems. The millimetre scale is where everything happens.

Because poets don’t work in teams—like actors—they don’t need to collaborate. On the contrary, conformism is death for them—it prevents them from generating the new forms which are their memorable achievement. If they clung to the centre, they would simply hammer away producing cover versions of what already existed, and which no-one would want. They must take decisions which will allow them to go out into the unknown. We have suggested that differentiation is the key function of modern poetry—the focus on superfine detail is because the differences between poets are also on the millimetre scale. This is a disturbing suggestion; surely we need to consider the possibility that self-seeking is a minor activity of poets, associated with phases of insecurity and immaturity—and that the renewal of perception allows the ‘small-scale’ poetry to deal with all the subjects of great poetry—birth, death, the nature of the stars, the origins of society, the sources of the personality, the appearance of water, love, animals, architecture, the weather.

It is stressful to deliver poetry, live, to an audience two-thirds of whom will hate it. The differentiation of poetry gets in the way of the *communitas*, the psychological unity of a temporary group, which is so central to art. However, reconvergence is the least likely of all outcomes. Before this could happen, British society would have to abandon its nature as consumerist, individualist, and valuing differentiation. I suspect that the people most inconvenienced by the balkanization are the reviewers, who would prefer the field to be completely transparent, so that they could make authoritative judgments (without having to do much work).

There are few sources of relevant knowledge except protracted reading of the poetry itself, and few reviewers bother to do this. One of the typical experiences of naive readers of this poetry is to find themselves in the middle of the sound but unable to hear the music. We have to learn the semantic context of this poetry just as we have to learn the names of flowers in order to study botany.

Because there are hundreds of other poets, you have to differentiate yourself somehow. We can suggest that this can be achieved by another over-fulfilment—pursuing yourself along your own axis. The means for differentiating are learnt in childhood, as part of the war for adult attention which never stops; mixed too with dawning awareness of how makers sell their goods—a lesson drilled into you by the frustration of how much you need something special that you want to buy, and what the features are which make it a must-have rather than just one of those hundreds of things you can do without.

The increase of affluence and the spread of education have been producing far more people who want to write or read poetry. This means that the number of poets you have to compete with is far higher. If we imagine the poet's work in terms of a shared space, it means that the space available for each poet is smaller, or that there are more people competing for the same niche. This makes it desirable to specialise—to dissimilate. The new landscape—the one which became visible to everyone in the first half of the Sixties—both created this pressure to dissimilate and supplied the economic resources which made it possible to sell such a large number of niche products. Perhaps people reached reflexivity through the experience of endless rejections. The new stylisation generated far more information—this is how diversity was made possible. When fully flowering—and after say ten years of accumulating—this produced a data-rich and niche-riddled landscape which, from the viewpoint of a single bewildered critic, could appear as balkanised. From the point of view of the consumer, this divergence was nothing but good—it prolonged the possibilities of consumption.

Some poets innovated in the way they wrote, in order to stand out and so fix themselves in your memory; and others relied on their social identities to provide brand recognition, without changing anything in the

standard model of the mid-century poem. They relied more on the prose biography on the book jacket, or in the back of the magazine, than on their poems. They expected readers to vote for themselves by admiring someone sociologically similar to themselves. Among the former, meanwhile, stylistic differentiation was achieved by fine distinctions. A shift into subjectivity created free variation which could be used to develop personalised stylistic niches. It occurred, necessarily, by weakening the functional characteristics of language. The speech channel was carrying a double load of information.

You realise your poetry is unoriginal and drop out of the mainstream. After years of fruitless effort, you succeed in writing poetry which is utterly distinctive and yet complete in itself. At this point cultural analysts come along and tell you you're guilty of balkanisation.

Everything happens as if modern poets are expressing, in their metrical, lexical, grammatical, and thematic choices, a protest against the assumptions of predictability made by sociologists and government policy-makers. An early statement of this position was made by D.S. Savage in *The Personal Principle* (1944)⁵. The difficulty with regular verse is that it is predictable, and exceptionalist poets want to use this moment of decision to indicate that the human being is in conscious control of their behaviour patterns, and can elude predictive formulae. Thus any violation of expectations in a poem may be a protest against the norms of society in the broad sense. Savage's concern was pacifism, a dissent from the machine for making war which the State had largely become in the 1940s. But later poets found other reasons for an equivalent level of dissent from the government and from the whole, far more extensive, project of rules and predictive knowledge which underpinned it. Unpredictability was often the key.

A great deal of poetry in our period was exceptionalist (as we may call it)—and few poets wished to be unoriginal.

Even poets who want there to be a big all-inclusive symbolic order, if only so that they can dominate the market by occupying it, end up with bitter complaints that it simply doesn't hold up. Can we pause to contemplate a despairing view of British history where the lifting of censorship circa 1644 unleashes a latent wish for religious self-determination which leads to

the collapse of orthodoxy and a growth of a landscape of cults which has prolonged itself into secular culture and has grown ever more dissected from that time to this? There are two views of the proliferation of sects. One is that the history of reading in this country is so much tied up with Protestantism and the instruction to understand the great truths by the light of your own reason that the themes of breaking away from authority and founding your own sect are things you breathe in every day. The other is that England was an individualist society in basic institutions such as landholding and family customs, long before the Reformation. Each view has an interpretation of the large-scale transition of the mid-17th century, with the collapse of censorship in the 1640s followed by a permissive post-revolutionary settlement after 1660. The second view would see the law which (grudgingly) tolerated Nonconformists as bending to survive the pressure of the real society even though the powerful in the land were violently against tolerance. Both views concede that suspicion of authority and theological creativity by learned and unlearned alike have shaped the landscape. Most of the poets discussed here have an imaginative place they go to and much of the discussion is about the structural rules prevailing in these places. The significance of these places—other than England—is probably that they fit into the empty space left by the evacuation of sacred histories—either Biblical or classical-polytheistic—important to an earlier, orthodox literature. I emphasize the personal quality because this is how we read poetry today: Anthony Thwaite is not a heretic but all the same his poems are quite different from the Anglican hymnal—and fill a different role in the life of Anglican readers. I have written at length about the sources of imaginative journeys but the point is not to reduce them to factual experiences. Rather, the way Raine uses Neoplatonism or O’Sullivan uses shamanism is part of their creative patterns. There is an artistic question here. Many voices have been raised saying that modern poetry is obscure, there must be a problem with ‘unshared backgrounds’, but these imaginative realms also allow these works to expand to their full extent. It is interesting that Mottram’s imaginary place is the USA, that Thwaite’s is Libya, that Logue’s is Troy, but their work is not necessarily obscure because it contains fog-free climates. We would surely not accuse them of an artistic crime because not all their poems are set in a suburb in England.

I must pause to ask after the balkanised reader. Surely you don't identify with this tribalised environment? No, you want to find good poetry wherever it is, even if the whole landscape conspires to hide it. You don't feel hostility to people you have never met. You don't see the merit of purposes in poetry other than experiencing beautiful poetry or producing it, and are equally happy whether they are achieved or not. This is my attitude. It would be pointless writing a book of explanations if everyone was loyally tribal. Taking up the cause of an individual who has been badly treated is a temporary deviation from detachment, which limits perception and should be followed by a recovery. It is possible that the hard core of balkanised agents are the professionals, who are so snarled up in loyalties, resentments, and feuds that this distracts them from poetry as art.

We are bound to ask after the conventional poets of the era. They stay close to the rules of everyday speech (especially between people who do not know each other well) and do not reach a personal style or a personal interpretation of human events. Their language is plain and the events they describe are predictable. All the same, there are a large number of them. Thus, balkanisation can be made to disappear if we ignore all the nonconformists. This is not very appealing. The orthodoxy of inhibited poets is an artistic disaster which is theoretically so wrong that we can attach to it the label of heresy. Meanwhile, thousands of tedious mainstream poets form the 'shadow knowledge' which hides a few dozen excellent ones from sight. The life of the group can throw up unexpected sequences of events without a revolution taking place. I am enthusiastic about the work of, say, Peter Levi and Anthony Thwaite.

Another line is opened if we posit the opposite of individualism⁶ as being communalism. Certainly there is an amount of communist polemic against personalised art, for precisely this reason. A whole realm of protest poetry uses straightforward language because it wants to deal with public issues, not ones which apply only to a minority of one. This would apply to the feminist poetry of the anthology *Purple and Green*⁷, for example. The Left is completely split between exceptionalist poetry and plain, documentary poetry, thoroughly continuous with the fabric of daily life. If we accept as a fact that the avant-garde does not exist in Wales (and

surely the counter-proofs are only stragglers, and hard to interpret), this would point us towards communal values which are expressed in poetry and which are fulfilling for those who share those values. Anglo-Welsh poetry is expressing an ideal, even if that ideal is close to social reality. The flip side of individualism may be alienation—a whole society of possessive individuals, alienated from each other, not forming a neighbourhood.

The open style offers the poet the possibility of creating a world of their own, where everything belongs to them. The problem is the allure of megalomania, the Alexander complex which incites creators to advance too deep into empty space and to annihilate themselves. The question of why a second person would want to enter this private, and privately owned, universe, is not easy to answer. The set conditions of this period reward someone with huge narcissistic drive, creating a place so warm that the reader wants to be there and identifies with the creator. This personality type offends widely held British values and is not encouraged by teachers, mentors, and peers. The mention of values reminds us that we cannot understand the impulse to revolt and self-determination without understanding the battery of socially approved acts, feelings, and relationships which inspire the revolt. This would call for more descriptive detail than we have room for.

NOTES

- ¹ Raymond Garlick, *The Delphic Voyage and Other Poems* (Llanrwst: Carreg Gwalch Cyf., 2003). p.64.
- ² Barry MacSweeney, *Odes 1971–78* (London: Trigram Press, 1978).
- ³ Eric Homberger, *The Art of the Real: Poetry in England and America since 1939* (London: Dent, 1977).
- ⁴ John Matthias 'British Poetry at Y2K' (*Electronic Book Review*, at: <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/exhaustive>
- ⁵ D.S. Savage, *The Personal Principle. Studies in Modern Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1944).
- ⁶ Emmanuel Todd, *L'invention de l'Europe* (Paris: Seuil, 1990); Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English individualism: the family, property, and social transition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); *The Culture of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
- ⁷ *Purple and Green: Poems by 33 Women Poets* (Sheffield: Rivelin Grapheme Press, 1985).