Nothing is being suppressed

British poetry of the 1970s

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British Poetry of the 1970s

SAMPLER

Andrew Duncan

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Introduction

Edward Lucie-Smith compiled, in 1970, a broad-based anthology of 86 poets. They were moving at different speeds. Mottram, four years later, by taking only the most innovative of these poets, created a magical environment in which we were hurtling into the future at an intoxicating speed. It is not too much to say that people who absorbed this environment saw a completely new world. Where elite poets were moving so fast, a comparison seemed attractive, where those who weren't moving forward seemed inferior. This insight was corrosive, even devastating, to reputation. It is hardly surprising if it was not shared by the people who were written off by it.

The rise of Jeremy Corbyn since 2015 raises the stakes for politicised poets who were born within two years of Corbyn and roughly followed his political trajectory from the white heat of 1968 onwards. The market value of cultural assets can go down as well as up. What sums up the splinter effect is that being a critic of Seventies poetry is like being Jeremy Corbyn – a startlingly wide range of people disagree with everything you say.

I am not trying to re-evaluate a period that has passed by. It was never evaluated in the first place, so this is the first run. Imposing a view from the present day would be unreasonable because poetic opinion in the present day is hopelessly divided. My interest is in presenting the Seventies through the eyes of the Seventies. The time is still here, simply overlaid by decades of later memories. The key to writing has been to forget everything that has happened since. To sink back into the horizon of 1975 and write something that suits the prejudices of the times.

There are several reasons for writing about the Seventies at this point. One is a reading of a recent collection of memories of the decade by participants (London poets, in fact). My impression was that they couldn't remember the period – too much time had gone by. They had lost all sense of differentiation and were writing about 1975 as if it was 2015. It is also possible that any attitudes of the previous time which didn't chime with current positions were being written out, consciously or unconsciously. The extent of the mismatch is of great importance, I think. This suggested that there was a real problem with memory, justifying an account based on contemporary documents. The other problem with memory is that we are living in a splinter dictatorship, a cultural phase where the forces of convergence have stacked arms and

opinions are split up into small groups. How can there be a collective memory when there is no single point on which all factions agree? So how can I record collective memory? In what sense is any statement about poetry true? But this argues even more for putting facts down and increasing the area free from malicious invention. We need to think about the divergence as a phenomenon in itself, a kind of cultural gravity that guides all the watercourses. The splintering allows local freedom at most locations – what it does not allow is unifying literary opinion.

Victor Turner remarks, about a tribe in Mali: "A fascinating historical and diffusionist problem is posed by the close resemblance between Dogon myth and cosmology and those of certain neo-Platonist, Gnostic, and Kabbalistic sects and 'heresies' that throve in the understory of European religion and philosophy. One wonders whether, after the Vandal and Islamic invasions of North Africa and even before these took place, Gnostic, Manichæan and Jewish-mystical ideas and practices might have penetrated the Sahara to the Western Sudan and helped to form the Dogon *Weltbild*. The Gnostic sequences of 'archons', arrayed as binarily opposed androgynous twins, have affinities with Fon and Dogon notions. (…) It is possible that adherents of such persuasions filtered or fled through the centuries to the Niger region and as bearers of a more complex culture exercised influence on the beliefs of its inhabitants." (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 1974, p. 161.)

It is hard, when looking at these banished and *déclassé* scholars spreading heretical doctrines among the culturally marginalised, not to think of the counter-culture – of whom Turner's book is, tacitly, the best picture. Fairly obviously, the geographical periphery (of the Mediterranean) is a stand-in for a social periphery within Western cities, the Underground. At the time, the accusation of not being alternative was enough to make someone burst into tears. The fantasy of having banned and subversive knowledge, of being the Underground which was preparing revolution, of making an exit from the institutions, of dissolving organised knowledge and breaking into a new productive intellectual framework, lifted people hundreds of feet into the air. Scepticism about the Cold War cultural consensus migrated into a creation of a hidden and suppressed and fabulous Past, left out of the records or caught in obscure texts. Thus, the Underground was a thousand years old. This story doesn't really allow the opposition to win, but suggests that the "orthodoxy", however defined, would have no power more than 50 feet outside their command posts.

I did not understand Seventies poetry as it was happening, but really picked it up in the 1990s. My career as a critic started with resentment at the false gatekeepers who denied the existence of an alternative poetry. (The phrase *Nothing is being suppressed* is a piece of dialogue from an episode of *Doomwatch*, in 1972.) This extended to the alternative scene and its internal failure to create a public account, such as reviews and anthologies. I am looking at Internet pages offering for sale *ivan12man*, by Ulli McCarthy, at £30, and the issue of *Joe DiMaggio* which includes two poems by Paul Gogarty, *How Much do Toads Eat* and *The Storm*, a snip at £50. I can't afford these, but I wish to claim that we have assimilated the Seventies, and the Seventies search project is over. This project lasted so long, it slowed up because we were enjoying it too much, it involved lavish amounts of cooperation, imagination, tenacity, and above all full-on shopping skills. I have a tremendous feeling of confidence about how far we have got, but I must admit that there are works I have never read. I do have *Stratton Elegy*, *Red Eye,* and early Hartley Williams poems, key Seventies products which were not published until forty years later. After assimilating 46 poets listed by Eric Mottram in his two statements on the British Poetry Revival, I have to reveal that there are roughly another 30, active in the decade, whom we need to esteem and read. The write-up must be incomplete because of the vast number of good poets. Obviously I have not repeated material found in my earlier books, so poets found there are not found here.

A long research programme, whose unstated goal was to disprove the thesis that poets have to use modern techniques in order to be artistically successful, was written up in my previous book, *The Long 1950s*. I am unable to use the same material again, brilliant as many mainstream poets were. If I am presenting information about the breach between the new poetics and the conservative literary world, it is in an attempt to end this breach, and this new book is written for the unpredisposed. A sector of the scene was changing at a great rate. Yet most poets wrote in traditional ways and were not stylistically self-conscious. The poetry audience did not have a progress ideology and made a limited take-up of the new style. I am sure that much in poetry was out of date and out of time, but I don't think conversation has changed all that much – and poetry is interesting in the same ways that conversation is.

The proposal that a thing X is part of progress makes a bet about how the future will turn out. This bet can be lost. If we look at the

poetry scene in 2018, it is apparent that the experimental poetry scene of 1975 has not become The Future. Experimentation produces a new thing but does not whittle the future down to a single outcome path. The more the "underground" poets converged, the more the future floated away from their hands.

Discovering affinities for one's own policies among the unratified traditions of the world was gratifying, but could be an exit from history.

Postscript

This was completed as a draft in March 2017, when Corbyn, as Seventies Man as you can get without having a collection of *Grosseteste Review*, was at the zenith. His exit to a cell furnished and wired by his opponents represents a defeat for '70s Left culture – not the first. I am tempted to say that poetic texts from 1975 are now suffering from post-Corbyn trauma. My feeling is that the possibilities evoked in the poetry, and articulated by politicians who failed to buy into the neo-liberal consensus, remain the most enticing possibilities. The social reception of this poetry is tangled up with the reception of a social possibility by the poetry. This reception has continued post 1980 and reached a glowing intensity between about 2015 and 2019. The history of the memory of '70s culture is now worth a volume in itself – mainly a record of vandalism, malicious rewrites, deletion of stored information, and even insect damage. Of course, the poets involved have also produced a lot of new work over the last 40 years – retirement and Corbyn sometimes generating a new fertility.

Generalisations about the Seventies

I don't propose to spend the time we have arguing so these statements are designed not to be controversial and are placed at the front as a basis.

Revolutionary ideals

It is 1967. Ginsberg is in London and a local talent is interviewing him about the imminent revolution of the soul. Iain Sinclair is pointing a microphone.

Geoffrey: It seems that Grogan and you are the only people who have any viable method for guiding & controlling the inception of mass psychosis that has to take place in order that any change of consciousness can come about.

Ginsberg: Is that what Laing said? I wasn't thinking in terms of inducing a mass psychosis. Of course, his definition of psychosis is: a breakthrough of the old consciousness formation & an insight into the new.

Geoffrey: How about spiking the water supplies of the big cities?

Ginsberg [says no] The whole thing is deception & hostility & force anyway.

[…]

Ginsberg: We all have that reservoir of awareness which has been repressed or suppressed or conditioned, but as anyone knows who has expressed a unitive experience or an LSD experience, it's there all along, the awareness. What Blake and all the visionaries have been saying for centuries is that we all have the awareness but we're not using it. It's not up to the surface, as the analysts will say.

[…]

Geoffrey: By what practical steps do you envisage the change of consciousness coming about? Do you envisage people setting up their own self-satisfying communities & these communities spreading, other people forming similar communities?

Ginsberg: Once you have a large group of people who have touched the basic ground of their own nature, or the nature of the universe, then they are mutually supportive. (*transcript printed in* Second Aeon*, 14, 1971*)

The word psychosis needs to be put in the connection of an official classing of psychedelic drugs as psychotomimetic. It refers also to R.D. Laing's idea that madness was an expression of genuine stresses and contradictions, and that by travelling through it you could cure yourself and reach a non-alienated state. I don't know who Geoffrey was – probably not Geoffrey Howe.

This is the LSD-based radicalism and my point is how envious modest poets were of this and how *small-scale* art seemed which didn't offer that spiritual lift, (or trip into hyper-inflated meaninglessness, whichever it was). It is quite clear that much poetry in the Seventies was written as part of this planned change of consciousness. The urgency of vision leads on to the project for imitating Blake, which was central. We have to recall something else, the spirit of the student revolt of 68, which was another kind of radicalism but one with no roots in religion but instead a commitment to rational change through changes to laws and reform of the machinery of government, a continuation of the Enlightenment. Collective memory has merged these two currents, but on the ground their members couldn't agree on anything.

Geoffrey: It's like the end of the cycle. All the religions seem to have foreseen this. It's thought that every 500 years or so the doctrine was going to decline radically & at the end there would be a period when the doctrine was pretty well gone & presumably after that a new doctrine would arise & a new cycle.

This leads on to the New Age movement and in fact the term "new age" expresses the idea of a cycle closing and a new one opening. The contrast between a belief in great Time, preordaining what people feel and believe, and the individualism, stress on *my* personal spiritual path devised by *me*, is troubling but was not troubling to people who went on this journey.

1968 saw a student revolt in most universities in the West, and a good many of those in the Third World. The big media hit in Britain was the demonstrations against the Vietnamese War in Grosvenor Square. These could be televised, and met with incomprehension among people who saw the basic role of culture as reinforcing the willingness of the masses to carry out their role in the Cold War effort. The attitude of the students was so idealistic that pinning it down is equivalent to falsifying it. I can release it, therefore, by a dreamlike rhapsody.

Society has been based on inequality but we can put a halt to this by inventing a radically equal society. All the minorities are profoundly opposed to the social order and would go out on the streets to overthrow it if not for marginalisation which means that they are forced to remain silent. Everyone silent, actually, is on our side. In history almost everyone was silent but despite that we know what they were thinking due to our terrific levels of empathy and philosophical insight. Minorities need to be allowed to express their own feelings and insights but in the meantime we can articulate all that for them. Everyone has special insight but people who have read Marx and Freud can have this insight on their behalf. The people who run society basically see life in black and white and we see it in colour. Every social institution is based on the people who make it work and will collapse as soon as they realise the fact of their oppression. The media produce false consciousness in the service of the wealthy and people are wrong to believe in society as it is. The point of knowledge is not to serve as a test of memory, preparing faithful servants of the wealthy, but to liberate people. The realm of the imaginary is a projection of social concepts into other terms but can be seized back to reflect other possibilities. Authenticity is to be found in prehistory, among non-urban tribal societies, and in the Third World in general. There is an alternative everything and it is always better. Social roles are the instrument by which a corrupt society reproduces itself and turns everyone into cells of its body, willing to reproduce it. Culture is completely dedicated to making people accept lowly roles and hard work, but as society is sick adjustment to it means adopting a state of sickness which imitates functionality. The source of neuroses is this sense of duty which grows as part of socialising and which bestows abiding frustration. The advance of technology means that in future there will be endless leisure and the main problems will be in filling that leisure. The location of social reform is no longer in the workplace but in the structure of small groups and in the pressures which people put on each other. A reform of language is needed to disentangle personal relationships. Recapturing key moments of childhood is like studying history, it recovers the stages by which our freedom was forfeited. Liberation involves endless introspection and, even better, endless talking. The new society needs leaders who will emerge spontaneously while being non-authoritarian and we are ideally qualified to fill that role.

Generalisations about the Scene

— there were many long poems composed in the era;

— the volume of good poetry was very large;

— there was a growth in the scale of poetic production, probably meaning a slackening of the grip of gatekeepers;

— the take-on of new poetry by critics malfunctioned and broke up;

— polarisation of the new market took place, increasing the variety of poetry being written;

— there was a political crisis and poets were happy to think about alternative forms of government;

— there were three governments, summed up as three prime ministers losing their reputation;

— poets became politicised, and those on the Right were in a minority;

— most sectors of British industry were in deep trouble, both in profitability and inability to export. The news, thus, validated attacks on "the system" every day. The pattern could be analysed either as lack of capital or as overmanning. Modernisation was either going to mean a recapitalisation or mass redundancies. But, by 1976, investing in new plant was going to mean that you could cut millions of jobs without reducing output;

— Heath had an economic plan which called for the owners of capital to invest it locally and productively. They declined, and it turned out that the "turning point" had happened, in silence, twenty or thirty years before. The owners were more willing to see their shares gradually lose value than to invest fresh money;

— the mainstream was in deep trouble in the face of many factions seeing it as obsolete and stuck in imitation;

— gurus were in decline and the skills of analysing radically new claims about human behaviour, and new fields of knowledge, were making great advances;

— there was a decline in the influence of High Street publishers and an increase in the influence of the universities and student audiences;

— the rapid growth in the number of graduates changed the rules and especially weakened the ability of authority figures to impose arbitrary positions. The base came to dominate the apex;

— while the rise of universities was the central process in the world of knowledge, poetry presented itself as an archaic folk practice, ripe for colonisation. The mediation between disentailed intelligence and subjective expression was crucial for poetry. Poetry is made of information so presumably is made out of knowledge;

— the inflationary spiral which followed the oil price hikes of 1972-4 brought a crisis in the world of poetry magazines, which were unable to raise the cover price to match the new costs of paper and printing; there was a slump in the second half of the decade which brought a hardening of lines and possibly a drop in overall activity;

— in 1974, roughly, there was a collapse in the size of audiences for live poetry;

— the student revolt, the classic moment where the base tried to sweep the apex away, became much weaker. The unifying issue of the Vietnamese War was replaced as a focus of protests by the activities of the racist National Front;

— conceptual practices were on the rise, with their target of attack being autobiographical poetry rather than (as for *visual* conceptual art) the representational picture;

— there are no poor men who own newspapers or TV companies. Evidently, what the powerful had in mind was power for themselves and degradation for everyone else. The images of fellow humans which the media give are fundamentally false and consciousness which is fed by those images is also false, a kind of toxin. Intuition could easily be a metabolism of that falsehood to make it seem like personal experience and therefore true. Yet poetry was founded on intuition. Intuition is a residue of unexamined deposits;

— new lines of inquiry opened up language as something in which every layer was significant. This coincided with the *cultural critical* line for which every element of social rules needed to be questioned. In poetry, the division between data and rules was shifted. Rules were dragged into daylight and arbitrary rules were made up. Ideally, radical poetry could open up a path into a new society. Less ideally, the reader

scraps the message of the poetry and treats the poet as an object, a didactic cadaver of unreconstructed emotions;

— at the point where problems emerged with a set of rules for generating poems, you could follow the impulse into a zone of theory. Here, the presence of unlimited alternative possibilities gave a sense of weightlessness and freedom which could be the core sensation associated with reading poetry. Another fraction of opinion held that intellectuals could not write poetry and that speculation was forbidden. Poetry was to be weighty because freedom was denied in all the paths which had led up to it;

— the tempo of books was slow compared to the tempo of little magazines. The instability of magazines reached the same outcome, a final score-line, but went through many more cycles to reach it. The magazine favoured the possible over the attainable, the fragment over the finished idea, the new poet over the old one;

— a series of political disasters made the society wished-for wonderfully clear and tangible. It became sharp and poignant, enough to write about. By virtue of expressing wishes, this scene had a thousand, or a million, variants. Disliking thought about politics was allied to dislike of thinking about poetry;

— there were alternatives for focus, either on language as a serial signal or on the static data fields underlying language or perception;

— feminism rose steadily, starting to produce significant poetry in the second half of the decade; and was beginning to demand a separate market and standards of artistic value;

— while the English avant-garde was heavily in the grip of the American avant-garde of the 1950s, as the decade advanced it was becoming more normal for young poets to take local British poets as models; this arguably meant the end of the mid-century malaise;

— in Scotland and Wales, the student revolt directed itself at nationalism in the guise of decolonisation. In the outlands, the nationalists converted or silenced the Marxists, were strikingly successful at persuading the population of the worth of their cause, and made a transition into running civil society. In poetry, there is a geography of innovation;

— "magic realism" became a frequent phrase after Miguel Angel Asturias won the Nobel in 1967, and this opened up a quadrant of

the non-sociological. Together with the game poetry of MacBeth and Edwin Morgan, this meant that pre-runs of what was later called post-modernism were taking place;

— following the large-scale "collective improvisation" project of the *English Intelligencer* (1966-8), involving 40 or so poets, the idea of writing about space and territory as an organising principle for knowledge was influential;

— as chronicled by Alan Sinfield, the declining arc of the Anglican Church as the voice of cultural expression in England led to a feeling of being a ship with no sea for writers from that theological direction. Imagery of emptiness and being alone was popular. Theories based on the idea that history had gone wrong had some circulation;

— there was a shared project of imitating Blake which apparently came to an end during the decade;

— there is a quadrilateral in the "underground" and at its points are the hippies, the student radicals of Sixty-Eight, the New Age line of religiosity, and people interested in using language in unusual ways. No-one could hit all four points. Reading any poet involved slipping them into where they best fit in this charged field;

— anyone in the "radical world" was liable to suspect that the patterns they were playing with were unreal or unstable, and that there was a deeper world based on ownership which still followed 19th century rules and tempos. The whole game was brought to an end by a right-wing surge in 1979. Critics have exaggerated both to what extent conservative poetry then became interesting and how far radical poetry lost its credibility.

Three style blocs

There were three styles which had a claim to be the style of the 1970s. Anthony Thwaite published his classic scene-interpreting essay 'The Two Poetries' in *The Listener* early in 1974. He defines the two sides as, roughly, academic poetry based on close reading, and populist poetry of immediate reactions, written by the young (and the majority of amateur poets). Somewhat reluctantly, I have to modify his version: where he talks

about "vaguely permissive gestures towards self-expression and undifferentiated creativity", this doesn't sit well with the poets listed by Eric Mottram, where being critical is the entry ticket, and the work is highly differentiated. In fact, when Mottram launched the idea of an alternative poetry, at that weekend in June 1974, the whole enterprise involved a third sector, and the count of poetries inevitably went up to three.

The big thing happening in the 1960s was Pop. Culture was being written in a continuous present. Because of the influence of the new media, such as records and TV, a new mode of cultural consumption arose, separating people growing up after about 1960 from older generations. It would be difficult to imagine a modern poet who was not 'sensitive'. This is the contemporary idiom. There was a new and worldwide youth culture, and if we assign to people *born in the 1940s* (crudely) a primary role in it then we can lay bare a line of deep conflict between this sentiment (youth, hedonism, consumerism, irresponsibility) and the sentiment of poets born between 1920 and 1940 (crudely) who were saying 'culture is serious and is not play' and who were massively installed in the poetry world. The idiom of the new student poetry had nothing to do with modernism, the avant-garde, or even the British Poetry Revival, but instead represents the norms developed by singer-songwriters in the first half of the '60s, which have become unconscious and universal assumptions for poetry. These norms involve the death of rhetoric, intimacy, egocentricity, informality, but also a line of warmth, emotional receptiveness, lack of *hauteur*. It is not hard to see why the most prestigious poets are ones who reject these conventions. A key concept was play: people were supposed to do only things which they enjoyed, so that alienation would disappear, creativity would solve economic problems, and people could behave authentically. Character armour would dissolve, affection would replace habit and economic compulsion within marriage. Leisure would be the dominant activity. Hedonism would prevail over moral restrictions, and social life would be spontaneous and never boring. All this was the expression of a feeling that the older generation had lost interest in their lives, a diminished sense of reality with regard to anyone not in the counter-culture. The idea of 'child centred learning' was also applied in practice, and in fact the idea of childhood had been redefined in the wider society. These new ideas never looked like applying to normal jobs. The idea that 'character armour' produced cultural sterility was especially popular with poets, and the subjective 'sense of diminished reality' was applied to tired old poets.

In 1970, Lucie-Smith remarked on Liverpool poetry that "On reflection, the 'pop' element seems to me much less important than the commitment to modern art. The alliance between modern poets and modern painters has been of special significance to modernism as a whole", and continues to point out "the appearance of a small but growing number of extreme modernist poets in Britain. […] the sudden influence of a sensibility which was dominant in Paris and Zurich fifty years ago." (*British Poetry Since 1945*, p. 338) The key seems to be that students at art schools didn't have a problem with modernism, whereas their peers doing EngLit at university were taught by their teachers that modernism was dubious and probably right-wing; so modernism reached Seventies poetry via the art schools. What are pop songs like? The arrival of Dylan and of the mature work of Lennon and Macartney had blown a big hole in the world of teenagers and let the spectre of the avant-garde infiltrate through it. Being absolutely in the moment can cut two ways. It can represent naivety, the vividness of someone who has never been in love before or never visited a great city before, or it can represent great sophistication, the breezy wake of Breton and Prévert. Youth does not last, and there was a fundamental instability with Pop poetry, that it was either going to develop on the lines of its Surrealist or Dada models and start "the manipulation of found material" and so on, or to lose its youthfulness and sink into low-information dumbing-down. (I wrote about the new intimate or 'Pop' poetry in *The Long 1950s*, pp. 130–57.)

It is plausible that the *generation born in the 1920s* were the apical point of conservative, academic, sceptical, uninspired poetry. This would correlate with the Conservatives winning three general elections in the 1950s. In the cohort *born between 1920 and 1940* we find the highest level of interest in commitment, personal witness, avoidance of grand ideas and grand language, focus on the concrete even when it is unattractive, subordination of art to moral obligations, belief in tests and in style as a test of character. This can make for poetry which has no surface attractions and no deep attractions either. These poets were the "Mainstream". Early usage of this, as "broad central current," had a positive sound, part of a statement that eccentrics (i.e. modernists and intellectuals) could never write important poetry. The word took on a pejorative sense because of the prevalence of tedious poetry in the 1950s. Adjectives for this bloc are *academic, Christian*, and *existentialist*. A typical event is description of physical sensations and objects, with reviewers using adjectives like *tough, sensuous*, and *muscular*. In 1970,

we find a large number of poets writing to this aesthetic. This group has as limiting conditions its dislike of propaganda and of popular culture. Of the Christian-academic group of the 1950s we can mention Philip Larkin, Geoffrey Hill, John Holloway, Peter Levi, Anthony Thwaite, Emyr Humphreys. The retreat to the island correlates with a belief in ethical and literary restraint: the scale of the remaining poem is out of proportion to the giant nature of the prohibitions hemming it in. A tiny area of close attentiveness is defined as the truth.

For the third bloc, we are going to rely on a description by Eric Mottram. There had always been an experimental fringe. Around 1960, a patch of the poetry scene changed radically and was the start of what Mottram called the 'British Poetry Revival'. Books like *City*, *Persephone*, *torse 3*, *Songs, Identities*, *The Nature of Cold Weather*, *A Domesday Book*, *A Theory of Diet* signalled the arrival of a new experi-mental sector. This area involved work, complexity, ideas. The incredulity of a whole bloc of readers about the local Big Figures is a key fact for what happened next. The new poetry deleted the local legacy, but had an 'elective ancestry', transfusions of poetic DNA from the original modernist poetry and from the American avant-garde of the 1950s. In his essay about the 'British Poetry Revival 1960–74' published as part of the catalogue for a conference in 1974, Mottram lists, first of all, 17 of the poets in John Matthias' 1971 anthology as:

> David Jones, Hugh MacDiarmid, Basil Bunting, Charles Tomlinson, Ted Hughes, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Christopher Logue, Gael Turnbull, Matthew Mead, Nathaniel Tarn, Roy Fisher, Christopher Middleton, Anselm Hollo, Ken Smith, Lee Harwood, Harry Guest, Tom Raworth.

He then adds 19 poets Matthias left out:

> Tom Pickard, Bob Cobbing, Stuart Montgomery, Jeff Nuttall, Allen Fisher, Dom Silvester Houédard, Jeremy Hilton, Elaine Feinstein, Michael Horovitz, David Chaloner, Andrew Crozier, Peter Redgrove Barry MacSweeney, Jim Burns, Edwin Morgan, Chris Torrance, John James, Peter Riley, John Hall.

Mottram wrote another text for the 1977 PCL Conference. The anthology for that event added:

Peter Finch, B. Catling, Iain Sinclair, Bill Griffiths, Colin Simms, Tom Leonard, David Tipton, J.P. Ward, Eric Mottram, and John Freeman. Total: 46 poets

The additions largely cover a new generation, not visible in 1971. Actually, any historian of the Seventies is going to be filling in the negative space left around Eric's era definition, which is complete in itself.

Mottram says the centre of his document is the catalogue of small press resources, and his opening paragraphs make the focus the use of small-scale economics, the thesis that non-capitalist production is the key and that it instantly bypasses factors of repression, conformism and commodification. Thus the exit from "the business" brings about nonconformity and this brings about artistic success. He gives a much clearer picture of cultural censorship and its systematic connections than of the new art. The filtering directs the art towards comfort and ease – the opposite of resistance. It is rare to find a document which so vividly expects capitalism to dissolve just by people walking out of it. The poets in question had chosen to take great risks and write in a style which was alien, eccentric, easy to mock, uncomfortable, one-sided, taken to extremes, out of proportion (and so on). It was not imitating existing speech. With time, these styles became acceptable: as we grew to take them on. Mottram was powerfully encouraging young poets to experiment. His style is compulsively aggregative – he sets up 40 wonderful artistic assets and then rolls them up together, and rolls 30 or 40 poets up together. None of the poets had all 40 assets, in fact it is doubtful they had more than four or five, so there is a gap between the position statement and the poems themselves. Stylistic affinity is never claimed for his raft of poets. This makes it irrelevant to ask whether the "revival" continued after 1974, or whether someone belongs to it. No group is being identified, rather a perimeter of repression and an outlaw economy.

Strangely, Eric seems more interested in cultural critique than in the exploration of subjective feelings – the personal realm. This does not reflect a distrust of such poetry but a distrust of the public sphere. The belief in intellectuals belongs in a time when civil society was expected to solve its problems, before a time when a systematic overview only came from accountants.

I don't want to spend time on identifying the overlap between Lee Harwood and Hugh MacDiarmid, or squeezing people born before 1900

and after 1940 into one generation. I suggest that we scrap the seven poets in the first block above, all of whom reached maturity before 1960. This gives us a generation, a cultural object we can think about. Incidentally, Mottram's wording makes it clear that he associated the *viv* part of "revival" with live as in live performance, and its boom in the Sixties, and he was not thinking of a prior "poetic death", which he never mentions. He was writing a catalogue to an exhibition open for three days only, and we need to tweak his list to make it work for us. Eric also does not talk about the impact of the cultural waves of 1967 (psychedelia) and 1968 (student revolt), although it would be surprising if this impact was nil.

So, what is the difference between the Fifties style and the BPR poets? One line is that in the new poetry the poet is allowed to draw information from anywhere and sequence it as needed to support an argument. Original blocks of experience are dissolved out to allow other patterns to be presented. It is going to be a culture-critical argument, in general.

The availability of this data points to a shift in the economics of information – data has become cheap (and the reader is expected to be flexible about dealing with rapid shifts of frames of reference). The underlying goal is to generate new information. The recombinatory power is attained by breaking down rigid connections (which may be typical of everyday speech).

The low level of predictability requires the poem to flip out of conventional bonds to a community or an ego, because those patterns are predictable. Authenticity is not a pivotal value. The response (part of it) said that the new poetry was lightweight – it was covering a vast terrain but without density. Its cargo was abstraction, speculation, theory, new analogies. It was interested in patterns rather than facts.

This poetry is made of numerous, small, independent parts and not of few, large, rigid parts. It is not focused on predictable patterns in the world we live in. Sequence of ideas has become the dominant feature, and classification of endless different forms of montage, frame-shifting, capture of frames and textures, etc., asks for attention. The leaps may be irritating because they suggest so much freedom for the poet, taken as winning by unfair means.

Without a sweep of philosophical forgetting that produces ignorance, the game of building a *new* world of knowledge cannot get under way. The project of new connections of knowledge involves the loss of the old ones. This can produce infantile language. It can be

intensely annoying to those whose (old) knowledge is a form of status – and an investment.

When every individual has autonomy, the possibilities diversify out of control – this is desired as much in a transformed *society* as in the poem. This diversity disables traditional political arguments in poetry – every focus is dissipated except the attack on constraints. Coherence becomes a problem.

The poetry does not loop back to record and project a personality. Realism is less valuable than richness of patterns and their openness as a matrix in which unfamiliar analogies are created. The point of departure for this freedom is mediation through an existing text, in which the new poem hangs as if in a tree; it is not wiped from memory but is a source for patterns which are dissolved out of their bindings. The 'tree' may be a work of visual art. The double layer makes conscious what is normally the unconscious aspect of speech, a reflexivity which allows a personal signature to permeate and also allows a recognition of the history of style which is also part of cultural critique.

Along with a cheap attitude to data goes a habit of treating data as a material that can be inverted, cut to length, stretched, translated into numbers. Language becomes an object with the passivity of objects.

I like this solution, but I have to question how much of the primary data it really accounts for. If we ran through 30 patterns of change, we might get something approximating to a complete explanation. And utter exhaustion. This one does have some interesting patterns to offer. After discovering that the population being studied is not homogeneous, we have to halt. There was a generational shift but we have to build a low-res structure so as to be vague enough not to distort things. We can deduce that Ken Smith differs from many of the BPR poets and also the generalisation we have outlined. According to rumour, he disliked the poetry of all the other BPR poets except Pickard and Nuttall.

Other poets who will migrate into the underground during the decade include Tony Lopez, Michael Haslam, Michael Gibbs, Steve Sneyd, Maggie O'Sullivan, John Ash, Jeremy Reed, Denise Riley, David Chaloner, Anthony Barnett, Ralph Hawkins, Asa Benveniste, Robert Hampson, Grace Lake, Tom Lowenstein, Gavin Selerie, Nigel Wheale, John Wilkinson, Rod Mengham, Martin Thom, Paul Brown, Brian Marley, Philip Jenkins, Peter Philpott and Paul Gogarty. Biologically, this list includes a number of poets born during the 1930s and an especially dense concentration of those born during the 1940s. The

dates obviously affect the development of this bloc over the ensuing thirty years. Generally speaking, the poets directly involved in the events of 1968 will join the Underground and will not sign up with any High Street firms.

The history of the decade involves the intertwined fates of these three blocs. My aim is not to pick winners, but to recover real differences which were misrepresented for partisan reasons. The direct participants recognised categories, and I am trying to make explicit the basis for those judgements of category. The free-data thing allows us to separate conventional young poets and unconventional ones, an often discussed point for the poets emerging roughly 1970-1990. Just to get perspective, around half of the 86 poets in Lucie-Smith's 1970 Penguin anthology don't fit well into these 3 blocs. You could make them fit, with a hammer, but they aren't a good match. Poets succeed by being idiosyncratic. Plausibly, feminism provided a new and fourth bloc from 1975 on, appealing to a large market not usually interested in poetry while arguably not providing a new model for how a poem is written.

Faber published four volumes of *Poetry Introduction* in our period (dated 1969 to 1978), and these offered a list of 33 young poets who could be read as a version of what was happening in the decade:

> Nº 1 includes Douglas Dunn, Elaine Feinstein, Ian Hamilton, David Harsent, Bartholomew Quinn, V.C. Horwell, John Cotton, John Daniel, Jeremy Hooker;
>
> Nº 2: Paul Muldoon, Wes Magee, William Peskett, Alasdair Maclean, Pete Morgan, Richard Ryan, Clive Wilmer, Grevel Lindop, Dick Davis;
>
> Nº 3: John Cassidy, Gillian Clarke, Valerie Gillies, Paul Groves, Ian McDonald, Andrew Motion, Tom Paulin, Jeffrey Wainwright, Kit Wright;
>
> Nº 4: Anne Cluysenaar, Cal Clothier, George Szirtes, Alastair Elliot, Alan Hollinghurst, Craig Raine.

Exactly one of these names re-appears in Mottram's "top tips" of 46 names – already a sign that we are dealing with a different view of the world. Crudely, we can define this group as the continuing mainstream

of the Seventies; a survey of the poems included shows a profound breach with the Movement poets and Fifties inhibition. These are early poems, and we would do better to look at 33 first books (or, even better, second books). Names which we still know forty years later are Jeremy Hooker, Craig Raine, Jeffrey Wainwright, George Szirtes and David Harsent.

Vitally, Mottram is claiming that only the rejected, only those who reject the poetic centre and write in an "anti-language", are genuinely creative. It would be surprising if all the poets favoured by "mainstream editors" were bad, and in fact that was not a true claim. It is hardly true, either, that editors did not share the tastes of most of the poetry-reading audience. His is not the only view. If you look at Lucie-Smith, he includes about half of Mottram's poets. So this was already there in the High Street. To get the decade, it is important to read also the notes in Lucie-Smith's anthology. He includes 86 poets, and generally relates each one to a microclimate of opinion which views work in that style as necessary. He breaks down the separation between wish and fulfilment. The 'impresario' who devises the style may not be the same person as the poet. Mottram perceives a gulf whereas Lucie-Smith shows us a continuous landscape, where the extreme regions are in contrast with each other. Mottram's version is more exciting but Lucie-Smith's is more convincing.

Turning Point?

The thirty years after the war saw steady growth in the wealth of the West. People had absorbed this rise in expectations as if it were historical law, and this euphoria was actually more overwhelming for the young than for people with longer runs of experience to offset it. In 1973, let's say, people would walk out of their jobs in the expectation that other jobs would be available as soon as they were ready to work again. The thirst for social reforms was a side-effect of a prosperous feeling which meant that the costs were not expected to cause bankruptcy and poverty. The shift from this to expecting a future of zero growth, with ever increasing problems from the scarcity of natural resources and shifts in world power and prices, was profound and irreversible. It is very hard to recover what the euphoria meant as a state of mind.

British politics were ripped in two by the oil price shocks, which catastrophically shifted the terms of trade, led to a sterling crisis which

saw the government apply to the IMF for a special loan – something normally reserved for Third World countries in crisis – and then led to inflation which broke down the relations between workers and employers.

Inflation at 26% saw the impoverishment of groups who couldn't obtain equivalent wage rises, which employers were being encouraged (by shareholders, media, and government) to withhold. This switched euphoria off like a light. But I can't find clear traces of this in poetry. Dominic Sandbrook's recent book on the Seventies (about 2,000 pages, for the whole decade) says that "certainly by 1972, […] the counter-culture was effectively dead". This would locate the whole of the rest of the decade as a reaction to the end of the dream. This could involve, variously, abandoning a creative life for a safe job and a mortgage, stepping up oppositional practices into a dogma, usually Marxist, in which compromise was simply weakness, a move into single-issue politics, regrouping as a "failed elite", or a retreat into New Age spirituality. I am not convinced that 1971 was the right date, and other sources put the same event in 1974, or over a stretch 1974–76. Sandbrook cites a key counter-cultural event which took place in August 1974, contradicting himself. In any case, a loss of energy among the most influential and advanced groups was simultaneous with primary experience of the new ideas among more peripheral groups – the outwash of the initial wave. Something which was new in Berkeley in 1966 might be new in Burnley in 1974. The Counter-Culture became more and more energy-rich as it spread outwards and affected more and more people. We have to superimpose two processes – a continuing rapid change of fashions among a "youth elite" group, working in the media in a few rich cities, structurally under pressure to be ahead, and an outwash, affecting a *far larger* number of people, less fragile, more substantial, and adapted to last for longer by shedding the more illusory and unsustainable features of the original ideas complex. I suspect 18-year-olds were as idealistic in 1975 as they were in 1968. The doorway into personal gnosis could not be sealed off again.

The starting point for this book was reading recollections by 'underground' poets of the decade and noticing that they didn't record any disillusion during the decade and didn't record any phase of burning optimism and political idealism, possibly because mentioning this would have exposed the fact that they had lost it. You can't recover the Seventies without radical politics, without a terrific high of irrational

expectations and an irrational crash of pessimism, despondency, emptying of shared symbolism. The exciting quality of alternative poetry in that time was that it contained, even in non-verbal form, the optimism of the poets writing it and of the people around them: the future was the essential content. This future is no longer available. However, I can't find any poets who admit to disillusion, or poetic texts which record the passage through self-doubt or the flattened, disillusioned state. My book is dedicated to recovering the euphoria.

The point of a ball, in a game, is to isolate meaningful action to a single point. Only those controlling the ball are really in play. The poetry world obviously does not work in this way, and there are hundreds of event sequences taking place at any time, unaffected by each other. If we imagine a ball in play, in this period, it would obviously be the developing movement of Sixty-Eight, or the Counter-Culture. Michael Gibbs: "The failure of the student revolts of 1968 and the privatisation of hedonism beginning in the early seventies (the shift from communal joy to the narcissism of the Me generation), followed by the deadening effects of AIDS on gay (in the general sense of the word) sensibilities, marked the exhaustion of idealism and the end of communality. The hope invested in the idea of an avant-garde has become just that: a theory divorced from practice, a loss to be mourned instead of a living presence. According to one recent account, the very discourse surrounding any discussion of the avant-garde already articulates its death. The dialectical double bind that fatally affects the avant-garde also conditions any avowal of an 'oppositional' or 'idealist' art. Perhaps the only beneficiaries of this dilemma are the theorists and art historians for whom art is already dead matter."

Gibbs was writing in 1992, a point at which the public's loss of patience with the Major administration was irrefutable proof that the New Right wave had broken and a new cycle had started. The great conceptual artist was referring really to the period 1974-1986 (especially). Economics seem to show a collapse in the audiences for live readings around 1974, and a decline in the number of poetry magazines during the period of high inflation, so the whole second half of the decade. The number of magazines recovered in the Eighties, and I can't detect any decrease in book publication.

The most celebrated form of exit from the counter-culture was through a bad acid trip. This is what happened to the foot-soldiers, and it was an inevitable accompaniment of widespread use of mind-

expanding drugs. If you want to know what this felt like, it is agreed that the first four Black Sabbath albums sound like a documentary of a bad acid trip. I have not found any poetry that describes this sound. Poetry is sensitive to cultural processes, connected to them by a thousand filaments, a picture of collective psychological states – but it is selective in every way. It cannot work as a cultural record.

I can only write the history for which there is evidence. Poets were taking on new schemas in profusion, but the schemas acted as protection against new and upsetting processes in the wider society. It is more effective to write up the history of the schemas than to find slippery matches between the poems and social or political events.