

# WHO'S AFRAID OF EXPERIMENTAL POETRY?



*John Goodby*

DOUGLAS OLIVER, DENISE RILEY, IAIN SINCLAIR,  
*Penguin Modern Poets 10*. Penguin, £5.99  
IAIN SINCLAIR (ED.), *Conductors of Chaos*. Picador £9.99  
MAURICE SCULLY, *Prelude*. Wild Honey Press, 16a Ballyman Road,  
Bray, Co. Wicklow  
*Interlude*. Wild Honey Press  
*Postlude*. Wild Honey Press  
*Rana Rana!* Wild Honey Press  
RANDOLPH HEALY, *Flame*. Wild Honey Press, 16a Ballyman Road,  
Bray, Co. Wicklow  
*Arbor Vitae*. Wild Honey Press

“You are”, is probably the appropriate response to the nervously joshing title above, under which *Metre’s* editors flagged this essay two issues ago. There may be no real need for this; with the slow breakup of some of older certainties in mainstream verse, its pollination by accessible postmodernism as signalled in Kennedy et al’s *The New Poetry*, things are changing. Nevertheless, no one’s really sure. The lion will lie down with the lamb before J.H. Prynne reaches out to what he would see as the thinking person’s John Hegley, “Rhyming” Simon Armitage; but some Poetic Cold War certainties are undoubtedly dissolving fast. Given this, *Conductors of Chaos* is a crucial text in the process of meltdown. “The scam”, as Andrew Duncan has it, “is that Welsh underground hippie, psychogeographer, stallholder, sunstroke victim and small press poet reincarnated as distingu\_ High Street Gothic novelist, topographer and star of *London Review of Books* Iain Sinclair has dredged up thirty-six survivors of the Left modernist poetry scene which was closed down, erased from the tape, violently abused and generally kicked into the poetic X-files by the poetic Right in the seventies.” Experimental poetry has its Fall myth, its historical trauma coincident with the rise of Thatcherism, centred on the Arts Council coup against Eric Mottram as editor of *Poetry Review* which led to his, and others’, resignation on 26 March 1977, and a conservative backlash crowned by Motion and Morrison. *Conductors*, then, is also part of that

return of the repressed (or, better, of the downright disappeared) which made a painful recovery in the late Eighties and Nineties: through, *inter alia*, Crozier and Longville's *A Various Art* (1987), *The New British Poetry* (1988), *The Tempers of Hazard* (1993, but pulped by Rupert Murdoch before it hit the bookshops), Paul Green's *Ten British Poets* (1994), Maggie O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women* (1996), Clive Bush's *Out of Dissent* (1997), and the journals *Parataxis* and *Angel Exhaust*. And, lest we forget, that "backlash" was distinguished precisely by a belief in its Left and populist nature even as it rolled the rules and theory of poetry back to the 1950s.

Whether this narrative is the whole truth or not, Sinclair's rather Gothic and paranoid "scam" is justified to the extent that his book completes one phase of the healing process, despite the odd wobbly moment. In particular a lack of golden meanness makes it a perfect induction course for beginning readers, allowing them to piece together their own maps through "chaos". For to decide what works, you have to define it against the stuff by "egg-heads minus the yolk", in Ian Samson's words (the tendency to think Big Theories = Big Poetry). It's a learning process which should deter no-one, if only because there is so much that's good, even mainstream user-friendly here—cris cheek's "Stranger", Kelvin Corcoran's and Rod Mengham's lucid intellectualism, performance / concrete work by the likes of Aaron Williamson, shamanistic self-detonations by Maggie O'Sullivan and the barbed sentiment of John James and Barry MacSweeney, two poets who move in equally illuminating post-Sixties trajectories. A favourite is Drew Milne, the youngest in the anthology and a major talent in the making (overlooked in all the New Gen-derived definitions of a Scottish poetic renaissance), who is represented by the dizzying, singing densities of "Foul Papers":

Clamour for change, with this to plough on  
 even though fresh mint, under a flat  
 climate, borders on wisteria  
 buoyed and flushed in a slogan too far,  
 or wills no attempt to portray what palls  
 as in every body flirts don't they?  
 So minting, some feel like death over it  
 whose only sin is unlikely grist,  
 wit and wag this sizzling raunch bears all,  
 wailing wall to boot, and now we're told  
 due more to Herod's engineering,  
 nature notwithstanding, as a fly  
 passes on withering western winds,

and all the bold sedge goes hand in fist,  
spent in forage round other and earth.

Here, as John Wilkinson has said, “however refractory the material... a pathway is afforded, an argument is forwarded out of whatever materials may come to hand, and... there is no programmatic ‘subversiveness’”. Despite the resistant surface, we can move from the (news)“papers” of the title to the illusory belief in “change” promulgated by the media, the passivity which information saturation paradoxically induces, to see how the “message” is indistinguishable from the extraordinarily material (and sensuous) language which, as a Marxist, Milne fashions to trip up and resist manipulative discourses. It also presents fairly starkly the issue on which mainstreamers and experimentals differ most—acceptance (more or less) of romantic modes of self-expression, the validity of authentic “voice” (the belief of Patrick Warner in *Metre* 3, that “poetry is nothing if not personal-ity”), or insistence on formal mechanisms to place language over thematics and prevent the representation of a continuous or coherent self or lyric “I”. For the experimentalists, of course, it is only through an investigation of subjectivity, a rejection of the expressivist first person and its disguises, that poetry can resist the commodification of the self by the debased discourses of late capitalism.

That way lies a lot of heavy theory of course; but this shouldn’t prevent the reader from beginning where s/he would begin with any book, with likes and dislikes. Although the self-ghettoizing mind-set of some experimentalists requires loyalty oaths to everything on offer, indiscriminate rhapsody never did anyone—least of all the best writers—much good. If Brian Catling’s “The Stumbling Block” seems like an overlong and unwitting working of its *leitmotif*, say so. If Caroline Bergvall’s “In Situ” *looks* amazing but reads as pretentious mandarin pornography (“fanny running cum plying tongues in profound... 27.1.95 on wondering again/what affects/collective dreams”), then ditto. The only real point is that poets and readers are allowed degrees of error; the experimental must, by definition, go wrong sometime, although you trust most of the poets here not to abuse the privilege. Sinclair’s selections are judicious and thought-provoking (try Prynne’s “Chinese Language-Poetry-Group” and Lee Harwood’s “Cable Street” for different takes on poets you thought you knew) and—although this is a nineties anthology—five contributors introduce work by older poets—Nicholas Moore, W.S. Graham, J.F. Hendry, David Gascoyne and David Jones. (Milne’s Jones is particularly abrasive and enlightening—“The texture of [his] work is too concrete, unsanctimonious and even satirical in its mix of registers to become fodder for Heideggerian stable lads going mop,

mop, in the Augean horse-boxes of Being”). This provides some sense of tradition, though it’d be unwise to stress continuity too much with poets so strenuously committed to making it new.

Milne’s “mop, mop” is an echo of *Mop Mop Georgette*, Denise Riley’s 1993 collection; and Riley, together with Douglas Oliver, appears in both *Conductors of Chaos* and in the *Penguin*, along with Sinclair as poet. It’s a decent choice, though Sinclair doesn’t show up well in his short pieces; a romanticism which soars on ironic and gothic gales in longer works (and which outcrops occasionally as irritating mystification in *Conductors of Chaos*), thuds to earth here. Peter Middleton has observed of Sinclair that he can make “familiar Romantic claim[s] about the priority of unknowable feelings in poetry, feelings that reason can only reduce to a shadow of their numinosity”, and these claims are all-too evident here. (One result is the upstaging of poems by his bricoleur’s eye for an arresting title or epigraph: how do you follow the line—from Ed Dorn—“The only respect in which he was a Christian was the interest he shared with Christ in professional women.”?) Douglas Oliver is more various poet and, if he too is something of a romantic he is also more of a realist. While Sinclair shows no development in his fifty-odd pages, Oliver’s range is indicated by sections titled “from *A Salvo for Africa*”, “New York/Paris Poems” and “from *Shattered Crystal*” (this last includes poems on Heine and Celan, foreign poets in Paris like Oliver himself). Socialist credentials are aired in the opening “Our Family is Full of Problems”, which links a crumbling suburb in Coventry to the World Bank’s “basket case”, Africa, “ever falling behind this financial neo-colonialism”. That done, Oliver delves into African culture for what the epigraph to “The Infibulation Ceremony” calls “the limit of poetry: Western people’s [profound] ignorance of how their own cultures are viewed by traditionalist societies”. This is a “surface” politics, rather than the linguistic variety, but one disturbed by shifts of tone and voice, effective in a cumulative way: the selection from *A Salvo* ends with Britain as “our medicine man” and a powerful attack on the BUPA morality: “no jumping the queue to live, / no pushing others forward in the queue to die.” As Keith Jebb has argued, Oliver’s abiding concern is the extent to which politics is predicated on harm; “The Jains and the Boxer” brings this to bear on poetry by juxtaposing a religion of “harmlessness” with a history of boxing, and concluding: “The Jains know the flow of time free from harm. / The boxer knows its beat: destruction and renewal. / Poetic music flows, undulates, hits beats.” The poems on Heine and Celan I found less assured; as if, taking centre stage to write directly of the artistic life, Oliver aestheticized too much with “a colourous chord”, paraded too obviously the knowingness embodied in this final wooden abstraction:

His *Todesfuge*  
began. Later that lyric  
was, for many years,  
an urn carried in German  
ceremonies of forgetfulness  
disguised as memory.  
And so  
Celan smashed it  
with his intellect's hammer.'

As if sensing his limitations, Oliver writes that "Poetry's future lies in the direction Denise Riley is taking", although he appears to misread her when he adds that "The melodies are simply her own and therefore new". This ignores the extent to which she is concerned with the deconstruction of any sense of "self" or "I"; ironically, the work in *Stair Spirit* (1992) was distinguished precisely for its use of "melodies" not Riley's "own"—1960s pop lyrics—and hardly in any "simple" way. This is part of a general concern to avoid being controlled by the discourses of contemporary culture. Oliver is overtly political and personal in his treatment of this issue, while many of the Cambridge and  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ -influenced poets respond to the culture industry's penetration of the self with a poetry which empties out subjectivity and affect, rigorously abolishing inner space. The cutting-off-the-nose-to-spite-the-face dangers of this (of becoming one of Barry MacSweeney's "paranoid Cambridge Marxist prefects") are acknowledged by Riley, whose work stands somewhere between Oliver's keen sense of self and its complete erasure re-appropriating cultural discourses in order to investigate the nature of the lyric, which traditionally offers a laying bare of the self. It is this interest in genre and subjectivity which gives her poems their almost painful purity and bare-wire quality, making strange the tritest subjects, love or "bossy death", as in "Shantung":

It's true that anyone can fall  
in love with anyone at all.  
Later, they can't. Ouf. ouf.

How much mascara washes away each day  
and internationally, making the blue one black.  
Come on everybody. Especially you girls.

Each day I think of something about dying.  
Does everybody? do they think too, I mean.  
My friends! some answers. Gently  
unstrap my wristwatch. Lay it face down.

Here the protective mask (mascara, but related to the exteriority prized by the Cambridge poets) is set beside the really hard “face” of the “wrist-watch” which, unlike the woman’s, does not lie about time, ageing and loss of desire; moreover the tension between pain and an ironic rhetoric is increased—not dissipated—by the fact that so much does not “belong” to any pre-given authentic self (the 1960s “permissive society” slogan, the Eddie Cochrane line, the echo of Macbeth).

Irish experimental poetry is more neglected than its British counterpart and has been so for much longer—arguably since its founding rupture in Beckett’s “Recent Irish Poetry” review of 1934. Since then it has been paid little official notice, except for the odd *Irish University Review* or *Poetry Ireland Review* special issue on Brian Coffey or Eugene Watters, although academic interest in Beckett’s contemporaries is on the increase. Iain Sinclair’s use of Northern Irish poetry to attack the British mainstream—“Bog and bomb and blarney: a heap of glittering similes burnished for westward transit”—shows this isolation intensified by some very English ignorance of the Republic’s latest experimentalists, Randolph Healy, Maurice Scully, Catherine Walsh and Billy Mills. The pre-history of these poets runs from Scully’s poetry broadsheets of the early 1970s, through *The Belle* and *The Beau* magazines up to 1984, to Billy Mills’ *hardPressed Poetry* in 1985 which, displaced with Mills and Walsh to Spain and the UK, returned to Ireland as Healy’s *Wild Honey Press* and the excellent pamphlet series under review. Together with other developments, including rapprochement with the earlier New Writers Press generation, this could suggest that expansion may be on the cards. Trevor Joyce’s *Stone Floods*, Walsh’s *Pitch*, Healy’s *Arbor Vitae* and the sequence Scully began in 1986—*Livelihood, the Set*, 400 pages in five books—might be cited to confirm this; but the tale so far suggests that nothing can be taken for granted.

The biggest obstacle remains Irish poetry’s domination by discursive realism, metrical conservatism and an identitarian cultural politics. This is hardly to be overcome by an inverted parochialism—references to Bangkok—or even by using open form—as Thomas Kinsella does—as long as almost all poets remain oriented to tradition, closure, place; as Catherine Walsh explained in 1991: “You need to be incorporated into the tradition to be an Irish writer, and you exist as an Irish writer on those terms or you might as well not exist... you... must celebrate above all else your sense of Irishness and your sense of... writing out of bondage almost”. Safe, muted epiphanies on reach-me-down themes predominate in a poetry of “fixing our hearts to our sleeves with Victorian safety-pins”, what Scully terms “the Gem School”:

poetry (space) “is an activity

not a body of reading.”

I wonder how the Gem School feels about that?

Nevertheless, if they're frozen out, Irish experimentalists display a wide stylistic and formal range. It's as if—unlike some in *Conductors of Chaos*—they are free to expand and find elbow-room because of the virtually deserted literary space. Like the British equivalents they are keenly aware of information technology—its fragmented discourses, media-speak, computers—but they are concerned to challenge discourses of *national* identity, as well as individual identity or selfhood, which are insistent in a way unknown in England. “Irishness” is not so much to be ignored or resisted as slyly transfigured, subordinated to linguistic enquiry. Healy's *Arbor Vitae*, about sign language and the difficulties of communication, discusses language politics, but not in a way which a postcolonial critic such as Declan Kiberd would recognize. At a local level Healy's chief form of “enquiry” means using a variety of source texts, often scientific, so that, as he puts it, “meaning, far from being something static, locked within a particular set of words, becomes mobile and culturally dependent”. The intercutting, particularly of scientific material, helps distance the voice of a poem from the temptations to false identification. “Jim”, for example, in *Rana, Rana!*, tells the story of a man who always swam against the social current, and who eventually jumped off a cliff “falling at over fifty miles per hour, / an empty bottle of Paddy's at the top”. So far so anecdotal; yet the cliff has been described as “composed of Cambrian rocks, / massive quartzite, breccia, well-cleaned slate ...”, Jim as “bubbling with the selves of muscle, gut and brain”, and these languages resist the elegiac, though not in an inhuman so much as in a wryly anti-humanist way. The image of direction (against the stream / with gravity) frames the piece, which preserves the skeleton of the traditional lyric, but it is nevertheless an analytical exercise; the “bottle of Paddy” is empty, and no intoxication or consolation is on offer. Healy's aim is the undemonstrative celebration of randomness in ironically closed structures, of a world where “botched and sublime [bloom] without design”.

Maurice Scully's *Prelude*, *Interlude* and *Postlude* are more obviously avant-garde than Healy, and bear out Alex Davis's description of a “new futurism of... explosive poetic collages... in which Irish poetry comes close to the incendiary quality of the historical avant-garde”. *Prelude*'s “Stone” gives only a faint idea of the impetuous, breathless but surefooted quality:

Suddenness of  
the end of  
things

of the end of things  
freaked with jet  
as if

a penpoint purred  
the  
it

did & thunder thundered:  
NOTHING! at the  
gate

[Hans Arp laughs] ...

Irish experimental poetry is only now becoming properly accessible; there are two anthologies—though not as comprehensive as *Conductors of Chaos*—on the way, the first issue of hardPressed's *the Journal* due in autumn, an annual conference and a special issue of *Angel Exhaust* for 1999. Rather than critics still attempting to make postmodernists of Seamus Heaney, or to throw slabs of Adorno at poor John Hewitt (portrayed bizarrely by Steven Matthews, for example in his *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* as a poet of modernist “discontinuity”), here for once is the real thing. Although there is still a long way to go, it could be that the new millennium will witness the first flourishing experimental poetry scene in Ireland. Whatever the literary establishment there might feel, that would improve the range of all Irish poetry and, by challenging stereotypes, extend British poetry and criticism into the bargain. In Britain *and* the Republic, we would all be less “afraid” of any poetry—except, of course, of the sort which is trivial, complacent or just plain dull.