

The Forties:
A Doctorate in Creative and Critical Writing

Todd Swift

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Faculty of Humanities
School of Literature and Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

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This work is in two parts: a portfolio of creative writing (poetry), preceded by a critical thesis. In the critical aspect of my dissertation I contest a dominant account of poetic creation and influence in the period 1938–1954, and consider a third line of influence that arose in post-war British poetry. The methodology follows in the footsteps of *Other Traditions* by John Ashbery: literary criticism by a practitioner. My critical writing complements my poetry collection, whose various styles and registers relate to the poetic influences discussed. My first three chapters develop the argument as follows: Chapter One considers ideas of 'style' and 'poetic style'. Chapter Two narrows in on the idea of 'period style' in poetry and turns more specifically into a discussion of the Forties Style in Poetry. Chapter Three looks directly at the period under question, the Forties, and its key poet, Dylan Thomas, as read by critics. Chapter Four discusses F.T. Prince, a major poet much overlooked. Chapters Five, Six and Seven consider the poets Terence Tiller, Nicholas Moore and Philip Larkin, in the light of their writing when young, often concerned with love and desire. Finally, I conclude that Forties stylishness is an option still available to the poet who wants to access it. The Forties Style is another kind of late modernism – a viable one, ripe for revaluation, enjoyment and deployment, in contemporary poems and poets. My poetry collection follows, exhibiting how the Forties Style can be employed by a contemporary poet. The collection is in three sections: 'The Serious Business'; 'God Has Left Us Like A Girl'; and, 'Start Again'. Part One explores a poetics of style; Part Two explores a 'personal mythology' occasioned by grief; and Part Three combines style and the personal with a new note of optimism.

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INTRODUCTION

Let us avoid the assumption that rhetoric is a vice of manner

– T.S. Eliot, ‘The Sacred Wood’

Better, of course, if images were plain

– Kingsley Amis, ‘Against Romanticism’

In the critical aspect of my dissertation I will be contesting a dominant account of poetic creation and influence in the period 1938–1954, and considering a third line of influence that arose in British poetry in the post-war period. Hopefully, this will reinstate a way of reading a generation of poets that has hitherto been seriously neglected.

The anti-modernist Movement poets rescued British poetry from the fevers of Forties poetry, bringing along reason, sense, form, and austerity to their diction – or so a well-known version of events goes. What was resisted was a flamboyant, complex lyricism: a heightened manner, melodramatic at times. This Forties stylishness was sometimes glamorous, at times playful, at times baroque. Derek Stanford, in his critical study *The Freedom of Poetry*, defined the Forties Style as ‘over-ripe diction, the heavy lush music and exotic image’.¹

One thinks, in the British context, of the poems of Terence Tiller, W.S. Graham, Nicholas Moore, Henry Reed, or Lynette Roberts; in the American, of Ruth Herschberger, Delmore Schwartz or Joan Murray; or perhaps of James K. Baxter in New Zealand, and A.M. Klein in Canada.

During the Long Forties a various poetry was explored, wherein the marginal, the modern, the modernist, and the brazen intermingled. Stanford notes that the Apocalyptic movement’s stylistic programme was immensely open: ‘a synthesis of the Classical and the Romantic idiom [...] A blending of all poetic styles, a great gathering-up of verse “dialects”, of idioms outmoded and still in fashion (not even forgetting the much depreciated “yokel” speech of The Georgians)’.²

In the following chapters I will argue that this innovative period in modern poetry has been misread by many critics, reviewers and academics as a moment

¹ Derek Stanford, *The Freedom of Poetry* (London: The Falcon Press Limited, 1947), p. 137.

² Stanford, pp. 137–38.

devoid of much interest – sometimes as a failed decade. As Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan write in the introduction to their chapter ‘Poetry of the Forties: Realism and Rhetoric’, there has been ‘a tendency to neglect or disparage poetry written between the end of the 1930s and the emergence of Larkin and the so-called Movement poets in the 1950s’.³ Rather than seeing this in-between space as a failure, I see it as one of the significant twentieth-century moments in English-language poetry, not least in establishing a Forties Style.

This Forties Style is still available to access by the contemporary creative writer, I believe, much as Pater’s idea of the Renaissance is a more-than-temporal, ever-present ideal, and artistic option. I don’t believe that learning from, and engaging with, a period style that still has ‘juice in it’ is merely rehashing old ideas, engaging in archaism, or retro-style pastiche. Simon Reynolds writes, in his study *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past*:

The word ‘retro’ has a quite specific meaning: it refers to a self-conscious fetish for period stylisation (in music, clothes, design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation. Retro in its strict sense tends to be the preserve of aesthetes, connoisseurs, and collectors, people with a near-scholarly depth of knowledge combined with a sharp sense of irony.⁴

While I enjoy a sense of irony, collect books from the Forties, and have aimed for scholarly knowledge of the period, I cannot entirely agree with Reynolds in suggesting that affection for, and interest in, a period and its style must lead to pastiche and citation only. As this thesis will hopefully demonstrate, it is possible to recover and utilize poetic styles, in a truly contemporary manner, without merely being ‘retro’.

Though this is a critical-academic work, I take my bearings from my practice as a creative writer of poetry, who has found the poetry of certain poets who wrote in the Forties of enduring interest, inspiration and value, as reader and writer. My dissertation follows in the footsteps of works such as *Other Traditions* by John Ashbery, a book of informed criticism-as-appreciation and revaluation. My critical writing will also inform my poetry collection, whose various styles and registers

³ *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry: Hardy to Mahon*, ed. by Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), p. 129.

⁴ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. xii.

relate to the poetic influences discussed here. This is criticism as a literary and creative act; just as my poems that follow this critical part are creative, but with critical implications.

While there are several dozen poets from the Forties period who could usefully be discussed, I have chosen to focus on some of the most notable – and (sometimes) least read – poets of the period: F.T. Prince (b. 1912), Dylan Thomas (b. 1914), Terence Tiller (b. 1916), Nicholas Moore (b. 1918) and Philip Larkin (b. 1922).

These five poets form a generation born in the ten years (1912–1922) when the modernist period yielded its most famous poem with the publication of *The Waste Land*. All five began publishing as modern poetry underwent significant changes, prior to, during and immediately after World War II, from 1930 to 1950 – a time when modernist and anti-modernist schools of poetry fought over what the dominant styles would be.

The five poets I discuss in this thesis do not represent all the stereotypical mannerisms of the Forties usually associated with the Apocalypse and New Romanticism – though they were inflected by these movements. Two, Thomas and Larkin, are still ‘canonical’; Dylan Thomas less so. The other three, who might have expected to become canonical as well, found relative career obscurity after early publication success and important encouragement from major literary figures of the time (Eliot for Prince; Lehmann for Tiller; and Tambimuttu and Stevens for Moore).

Dylan Thomas was the pre-eminent and defining figure of the Forties mode, whose death sounded its de facto death knell; next came the Movement, whose emblematic figure, Philip Larkin, was ambiguously influenced by, and opposed to, Thomas. By bookending discussion of the lesser-known poets with writing that concerns these two major poets, I hope to recontextualise all of their poetry, and show how this cluster of poets offers a new way of reading the Thomas-Larkin generation.

What these poets have in common is that their poetry was marked by a manner that sought to use form and rhetoric (poetic artifice) to both express and deflect deeply experienced traumas and anxieties. These were poets alert to influences from foreign poetry (even Larkin), especially Italian and French, and highly sensitised to the manner of early Eliot and early Auden. They came of age at

the decisive point when the high modern lyric had ceased flourishing, but had yet to be replaced by another dominant style.⁵

As such, they were among the last and least appreciated of modernist poets – the final wave before the turn to the English anti-modernism of the 1950s. The work of Prince, Tiller and Moore has been perceived as artificial, stylised, cold, and over-mannered; usually by those who desired a less-deceived poetry. This tendency to devalue the rhetorical in poetry criticism remains current. A good mainstream example can be found in the Review section of *The Guardian*, where, in 2007, Kate Clanchy reviewed the Faber collection *Crocodiles & Obelisks* by Jamie McKendrick. One passage in particular stands out: ‘But Yeats was often inclined to be bombastic. McKendrick’s voice, in contrast, is resolutely unrhetorical.’⁶ As I will show as the thesis progresses, several assumptions made in these sentences are rather less certain than they might at first appear: is Yeats bombastic? Is all rhetoric? If so, is this a bad thing? And why is it to be assumed that a poet’s ‘voice’ is to be commended for being ‘resolutely unrhetorical’? Is there not a counter-claim to be made, for poetry to be magnificently flamboyant and artificial? One recalls Wallace Stevens writing of ‘the essential gaudiness of poetry’.⁷

My first three chapters develop the argument about style as follows: Chapter One considers the idea of ‘style’ and ‘poetic style’ itself. Chapter Two narrows in on the idea of period style in poetry and turns more specifically into a discussion of the 1940s poetry style; Chapter Three looks directly at the period under question, the Forties, and its key poet, Dylan Thomas. Chapter Four, the centerpiece of the dissertation, discusses F.T. Prince, a major poet much overlooked. Chapters Five, Six and Seven discuss the poets Terence Tiller, Nicholas Moore and Philip Larkin. Finally, I conclude that Forties Style is an alternative creative spirit still available to the poet who wants to access it.

⁵ Examples of the high modern lyric would include the short poems of Hart Crane, such as ‘Black Tambourine’, ‘Sunday Morning’ by Wallace Stevens and ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ by Yeats.

⁶ Kate Clanchy, ‘Walking with demons’, *The Guardian*, 1 December 2007, section Review, p. 18.

⁷ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), p. 768.

CRITICAL THESIS: Five British Poets, 1938–1954 – Towards a Poetics of Style

The notion that there could be 'style'

– F.T. Prince, 'Memoirs in Oxford'

Rapidly moving from the end

To the middle of the anthologies,

The poet starts to comprehend

The styles that never can be his

– Roy Fuller, 'Poem Out of Character'

And still we'd miss the point, because he spoke

An idiom too dated, Audenesque

– Donald Davie, 'Remembering the Thirties'

CHAPTER 1

ON STYLE

There comes a time when creative writers will want to think about the style they will write in, a moment when what seems spontaneous and unbidden becomes a subject of deliberate reflection. In this thesis, I will be thinking about style from a poet's perspective.

The ways in which ideas of voice, form and poetics have been brought to bear on contemporary poetic styles are complex. Writing about the visual arts, Arthur C. Danto has argued in his book *After the End of Art* that we are now in a pluralist 'post-historical moment' where a style of all possible styles is current.⁸ In other words, there is no longer a dominant style that becomes the paradigm case for understanding art in the way, say, that impressionism or cubism once was. Danto's book is useful for underlining the ways in which critical and creative thinking about art, so often elided with that of poetry, at times remains tantalisingly separate – not least because the 'end of poetry', in the sense of the end of the quarrel over poetic styles, far from being over, has come to almost represent the core intrigue of the discipline.

Judgements on style are not just retrospective, but also establish orthodoxies, of taste and reception, that continue to hold sway in the contemporary realm, so that my consideration of a seemingly historical period is also a consideration of living, current concerns. This is the period I call 'the Long Forties' (1938 to 1954) – a transition period in British culture and literature during which time there was a post-war shift to the Movement manner – most obviously moving from a lyric modernist like Dylan Thomas to a discursive anti-modernist like Philip Larkin. In a sense, it is a shift from those poets who maintain a willingness to be enchanted and chant, and those who resist such things, instead opting for a disenchanted, middle-aged English voice.

⁸ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Bollingen Series, 35 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. xiii. Danto's thinking on how historical aesthetic narratives have shaped the understanding of modernism and postmodernism, and period style, is useful for reading modern/postmodern poetry in English. However, as we have learned from Peter Nicholls in *Modernism(s)*, there is not one monolithic modernism, or postmodernism – but modernisms and postmodernisms.

My view is that the poetry of this Long Forties period continues to be of interest beyond the period – kept alive in the contemporary work of significant poets, such as John Ashbery, Geoffrey Hill and Denise Riley, who each explore variations of the modernist lyric form. Indeed, it may be said that the style of Ashbery is the Forties Style – that, more often than not, this later American poet gets the credit for a style he did not create so much as inherit.⁹

There is a trinity of terms that we need to keep in mind while reading ahead, and it is this: voice, style, poetics. My belief is that these terms are neither merely interchangeable nor entirely superfluous – one does need a handle on each of them in order to consider how best to write, and write about, poems, if only because almost all critics and poets tend to have a particular attraction to at least one or more of them. They are, these three, in fact, ways of coming at the same aspects of poetry, but with differences of emphasis rich enough to be constitutive of attitudes and whole critical outcomes. I needn't spend too much time on them here – over the course of these chapters they will emerge from the shadows and take a bow – but for the moment, it is, I think, important to say the following:

Voice has tended to be the key thing that British poets post-1945 have been meant to have – a democratic voice, rather than a tone, or style. Style is a somewhat old-fashioned, almost pre-modern term (and the subject of J. Middleton Murray's book of 1922, *The Problem of Style*). Voice says it all – it is the poet speaking in ordinary language that best represents their own self and their own place and time – and is the hallmark of most of the successful 'mainstream' published poetry since the Movement. Poetics, on the other hand, has become increasingly the term applied by poets who wish to move beyond ordinary language, in order to explore a poetry (or poetries) committed to process, radical formal innovation and philosophical exploration, within poetry, of ideas and theories often associated with European critics and thinkers, such as Hegel, Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault and Levinas.¹⁰

⁹ Stephen Burt, in his chapter 'John Ashbery: Everything Must Go', writes that Ashbery 'invented a style than can incorporate almost anything'; Stephen Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (Saint Paul: Greywolf Press, 2009), p. 246. Does a poet 'invent a style' so much as rediscover one? In my opinion, such a style is the Forties Style, not only a post-war American, postmodern one.

¹⁰ See for example: Gerald L. Bruns, *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) and Peter V. Zima, *The Philosophy of Modern Literary* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999).

There have been recent attempts to move beyond the conflicts that arise when two competing options for poetic composition, predicated either on a plain-spoken conception of voice, or a more austere and rigorous dedication to poetics, clash – and such a fusion has been called ‘hybrid poetry’.¹¹

What is clear to me is that this tussle between voice and poetics has meant that a certain bias has managed to build up, over the last six decades or so, against poetry that is neither ‘authentically’ self-naming and plain-spoken, nor determined by the linguistic turn of the post-war years. This would appear to be vague but can be instantly particularised by pointing to the work and reception histories of certain poets deserving of far greater attention than they patently receive. To name one: Nicholas Moore. Moore’s work makes little or no sense, read in the light of either voice or poetics, as neither was his guiding light.

Another way of looking at this critical blind spot centred on poets of the Forties, is to consider how the formalist concerns of the New Critics ultimately rendered some of the defining stylistic aspects of these poets’ work unfashionable, primarily in the New Critical quest for organic integration of form and content. As I will show, the excesses of style exhibited by these very ripe modernists (as with F.T. Prince) would have appeared quasi-Miltonic, or wilfully archaic, or worse, to key critics. But they would also have appealed, for the same reasons, to a poet like John Ashbery. As such, these Forties poets were prematurely postmodern.

So, the three points I wish to bear in mind going forward are that: 1) voice, style and poetics form a trinity of poetic concerns whose interrelationship is worthy of critical investigation; 2) despite what Danto argues regarding the history of art, the history of poetry is very much still in an ongoing period of debate and stylistic/formal flux; and 3) this leads us to the recognition that stylistic excess tends to exceed (perhaps by definition) the organic necessity required for unions of form and content – and that poets interested in stylistic utterance may tend to create poems that will not therefore be to the taste of many critics and poets.

¹¹ *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, ed. by Cole Swenson and David St. John (New York: Norton, 2009), pp. xvii–xxviii.

1. Problems of Style

The period I am here exploring has been variously called late modernist,¹² postmodernist, post-war, World War II, the Forties, intermodern, or mid century, depending on whether one is reading Tolley's *Poetry of the Forties*, or Arthur Edward Salmon's *Poets of the Apocalypse*, or Marina MacKay's *Modernism and World War II*. Significantly, there is no academic or critical consensus as to what to call the poetic period I seek to delineate and defend in this thesis; nor is it even clear which it falls into, the modern or the postmodern. Instead, as I observe here, it creatively straddles both periods.¹³ As the poets I will be writing about are based in a bit of a historical black hole, or at least a riddle wrapped inside an enigma, I will want to tease out a little what periods and period style mean for poets, and for reading poetry.

Frank Kermode, in *History and Value*, explores the significance of canon and period. He observes that notions 'of value in literature more often than not involve, as a rule rather obscurely, our views of the relation of a work to its historical context.'¹⁴ Kermode, speaking of the Thirties, admits to no fear that a 'stretch of ten years could be assumed to connote a *period* and a *style* of writing that we can recognize [sic] and argue about.'¹⁵ For the purposes of my argument, it is good to confirm that decades can, more or less, be their own periods, and styles. Thinking of how the term 'Baroque' came to be employed, he suggests that as 'stylistic description it simply floated free'.¹⁶ This is significant, again, for my argument, as I consider the Forties Style to be one, that, though derived from a period, can and does float free, as the baroque has done.

¹² Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 2–3. Mellors here states that late modernism occupies the period 1945–1975, arguing 'against this common misconception that modernism ended with the onset of World War Two'.

¹³ In terms of defining the poetic period in which the poets I am studying shaped their work and style, several works have offered possible maps. Some seek to present histories that establish a mainstream English line or perspective, such as *A Map of Modern English Verse* by John Press, *The Movement* by Blake Morrison, or C.H. Sisson's *An Assessment: English Poetry 1900–1950*. Then again, there are books whose position questions the more mainstream surveys of the post-war period, such as Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950–2000* and Andrew Duncan's *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British poetry*.

¹⁴ Frank Kermode, *History and Value: The Clarendon lectures and the Northcliffe lectures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 108.

¹⁵ Kermode, p. 117.

¹⁶ Kermode, p. 120.

To go back a little: in art history, a period style is related to the characteristic manner of a group of artists (painters) associated with a particular place and time; as Arthur C. Danto writes: ‘Mannerism is the name of a stylistic period which begins in the first third of the sixteenth century: mannerist follows Renaissance painting and is followed by the baroque, which is followed by rococo, which is followed by neoclassicism, which is followed by romanticism.’ Danto feels that ‘the term “postmodern” really does seem to me to designate a certain style’, which is significant because for Danto the term *modern* is grounded in a place and time that is over – ‘it had a stylistic *and* a temporal meaning’.¹⁷ The crisis for the contemporary – or the opportunity – is that ‘everything is permitted’ because there is no longer an ‘identifiable style’ of the period; thus, the period becomes the period of all styles.

In much the same way as in art history, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets* one will find that the major poets Shakespeare, Pope, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Eliot are presented in a linear, chronological fashion, representing the development of poetry from the Renaissance, to the Augustan (neoclassical), Romantic, Victorian and modern periods.¹⁸

Period style, and its chronological development, is not as clear-cut as it might at first appear. It is in fact problematic, if only because styles, periods and poets overlap, generating a slippage of styles. As Bristow has shown, it is not possible to locate a definitive history of style for the Victorian or the Modern period. Bristow argues that the 1880s and 1890s constitute ‘a literary period whose affectations and mannerisms have been subject to considerable misrepresentation’. He also notes the ‘intermediary uncertainty’ of the period, sandwiched liminally as it is between ‘High Victorian rhetorical grandeur’ and modernism.¹⁹

So, too, Alexandra Harris, in her book *Romantic Moderns*, charts the peculiarly ‘English’ forms that modernism took during World War II, as, in her words: ‘When war threatened, and when finally it came, the imaginative claiming of England took on new urgency. [...] Writers and painters were drawn to the crowded, detailed, old-fashioned and whimsical, gathering souvenirs from the old country that might not survive the fighting. There is a story to be told about this passionate,

¹⁷ Danto, p. 11.

¹⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets*, ed. by Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 1.

exuberant return to tradition.’ Harris sees this ‘English renaissance’ as a turn to home, in reaction to the ‘experimental pressures’ of high modernism.²⁰ It was not so much that experimental modernism was countered or replaced, but that it developed into a more complex, hybrid form.

While there are many styles within the poetry of modernism, the dominant manner was that famously developed by T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound, as they worked through their principles of imagism. This modernist poetic style emphasised the need for hardness of diction, classicism, and the rejection of poetic afflatus – in short, the infamous making it new; from Eliot comes the avoidance of the ‘emotional excesses of romanticism’ and the idea of the impersonal.²¹

Such an anti-romantic modernist poetry style is not the whole picture, though; for a style emerges in the modern period that mixes elements of several earlier periods. This can be identified as ‘lyric modernism’; Christopher Beach writes of this term as follows:

[...] two concepts that we might normally consider to be polar opposites: ‘lyricism’ and ‘modernism’. Both [Wallace] Stevens and [Hart] Crane were centrally important figures in the development of American poetic modernism; yet at the same time they were poets working within the tradition of post-Romantic lyric poetry in a way that experimental modernists like Pound, Eliot and William Carlos Williams were not. Stevens and Crane represent, in very different ways, the twentieth century synthesis of post-Romantic lyricism and modernist innovation.²²

Lyric modernism (‘arch-lyricism’) is not only an American phenomenon. However, British advocates and detractors of poetic modernism tend to mean the experimental variety, and not the ‘post-Romantic lyric’.²³ Once one begins to think of lyric modernism in a British context, it is possible to see that grand narratives about modernism ending with the Thirties and the Audenesque style are less clear-cut. Lyric modernism in Britain, I believe, reaches its zenith in the Long Forties. As David Rosen observes:

²⁰ Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), p. 10.

²¹ Rebecca Beasley, *Theorists of Modern Poetry: T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 10.

²² Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 49.

²³ David Rosen, *Power, Plain English, and the Rise of Modern Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 7.

In [Marjorie] Perloff's account, the advent of Modernism coincides with a breakdown of lyric: the brief gnomic poem, enshrining moments of Being, is replaced by more open forms, such as collage, which subordinate the poet's personality to a wide range of stimuli, and which express, in their refusal of closure, an ideology of action and process. The way is paved for constructivist sensibilities like Zukofsky and Olson, and language poets like Palmer, Bernstein, and Hejinian. But Stevens and Crane, arch-lyricists both, find as little welcome under this tent as Pound had under the other [Wordsworthian 'bleatings'].²⁴

F.L. Lucas, in 1955, wrote that style was not, as many thought, a 'deliberately cultivated, individual, peculiar style of one's own'. For Lucas, in fact, style can be best understood as meaning simply one of two things, a 'way of writing' or 'a good way of writing'.²⁵ Danto has what he calls an 'eccentric definition of style': 'a style is a set of properties a body of artworks share, but which is further taken to define, philosophically, what it is to be an artwork'. Here he emphasises the importance of a theory that emerges out of reflection on a practice. The Lucas position perhaps most clearly corresponds to the view of poets and critics who want poetry to be written in a clear, lucid manner; Danto's is more closely aligned to poets interested in, and guided by, critical and literary theory.

Critical writing on modern style in art often used tropes of writing to explore visual forms.²⁶ Poet-critics such as Pound, Hulme, Herbert Read and Adrian Stokes were influenced by and engaged with art and poetry, and since the post-war period, and especially in America, avant-garde poets and artists have tended to work with an awareness of each other's projects. As poet Charles Bernstein writes: 'Art criticism and art history, just as literary criticism and literary history, are made up of words and can't avoid poetics, can't avoid the problems of representation or the implications of tone'.²⁷ My response to this is to say that something very obvious has been forgotten and then remembered portentously; is there any kind of writing that stands apart from 'problems of representation or implications of tone'?

Bernstein's understanding of poetics is important for any contemporary poet or critic writing on poetry, since the huge spectre of 'poetics' in the generation of ideas and justification for poetic strategies hangs over nearly all 'innovative' poets

²⁴ Rosen, p. 7.

²⁵ F.L. Lucas, *Style* (London: Cassell & Co., 1955), pp. 14–16.

²⁶ Danto, pp. 54–55.

²⁷ Charles Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).

currently writing, especially in America; this idea of poetics is often contrasted, in Britain, with a more relaxed, amateur and non-academic approach to poetry composition, one felt to be traditional and springing from a genuine personal source (expression of experience).

Poetics is also the term used for works about poetry written by poets. [...] Theory suggests a predilection for consistency and explanation, and, like philosophy, may take the form of stand-alone arguments. Poetics, in contrast, is provisional, context-dependent, and often contentious. Theory will commonly take a scientific tone; poetics will sometimes go out of its way to seem implausible, to exaggerate, or even to be self-deprecating. [...] Poetics, in this system, becomes another form of poetry – something to be subjected to criticism and analysis, but not the model for the practice of criticism, scholarship, or interpretation that it, nonetheless, continues to be.²⁸

Style, to me, is not an expression of an authentic, personal voice, but it does represent the ‘style values’ of the poet, their use of, in Winifred Nowotny’s term, ‘poetic effects’.²⁹

Adrian Stokes, the poet and art critic, would not agree. Stokes, writing of the poetry style of Michelangelo, in the context of Dante’s *Stil Nuovo* (perhaps the most famous poetry style of all), has this to say: ‘More often than of their artificiality, the reader is conscious of great pressure, great sincerity, a violence, an unexpectedness in the use of worn-out convention.’ This raises various assumptions – that convention must be worn-out, and that artifice cannot also be sincere; and suggests the importance placed on what Stokes elsewhere in the same passage calls ‘his [Michelangelo’s] authentic voice’.³⁰

Camlot shows how for certain nineteenth century critics, such as Wilde, sincerity was approached as a ‘rhetorical mode’, one register of stylistic mannerism among many, thus inverting the usual idea of the late Victorian period that ‘style was the man incarnate’ – representing an authentic and personal ‘voice’.³¹

For Pater there was a need for ‘mind in style’. One of the great pleasures is in ‘the critical tracing out of that conscious artistic structure’ – what he calls

²⁸ Bernstein, pp. 75–76.

²⁹ Winifred Nowotny, *The Language Poets Use* (London: The Athlone Press, 1962), p. 24.

³⁰ Adrian Stokes, *Michelangelo: A Study in the Nature of Art* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1955; repr. London: Routledge, 2002), p. 125.

³¹ Jason Camlot, *Style and the Nineteenth-Century British Critic: Sincere Mannerisms* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 168–69.

‘constructive intelligence’. This is the ‘special function of the mind, in style. Mind and soul.’ As such, style is a matter of good taste, but not ‘the subjectivity, the mere caprice of the individual, which must soon transform it into mannerism’.³²

For Pater, style is not a question of choosing between ‘reserved, opulent, terse, abundant, musical, stimulant, academic’ – each is potentially fine so long as the style selected is ‘really characteristic or expressive’. Borrowing from Flaubert, he describes style as ‘a certain absolute and unique manner of expressing a thing, in all its intensity and colour’. Then, in a move that prefigures Eliot: ‘If the style be the man, in all the colour and intensity of a veritable apprehension, it will be in a real sense “impersonal”’.³³ Notice here how style has become the means of registering the distinctiveness of the world, not the self; a style that does not find its source in self-expression but in things.

The style of the Forties used rhetoric to explore feeling, in a way that, post-war, became increasingly suspect; suspect to those who confused plainness of diction with truthful expression, therefore turning against the sort of ‘poetic exuberance’ that Beach associates with Stevens (and can be equally applied to his follower, Nicholas Moore).³⁴

Style, I would say, enacts the world of the poem, expressing its aesthetic boundaries, and reveals the aesthetic choices, such as they are possible, that the poet makes in the process of composition of the text. Just as one decides to wear or not wear lipstick, or a veil, or a top hat, so a poet selects to use rhyme, be ironic, or use words like ‘gong-tormented’. It may be true that what we wear is borrowed, or second-hand vintage, but it is we who put it on (with or without a valet’s or a lover’s help).

G.S. Fraser (at one time an Apocalyptic poet), writing of Macaulay’s style as an essayist, thinks some styles are ‘lastingly imitable’ (such as Macaulay’s) whereas other styles, like those of Carlyle or Ruskin, are defunct.³⁵ To write using Ruskin’s style, apparently, would be like ‘dressing up in a dead man’s clothes’.³⁶ From Fraser’s perspective, then, it is not the period that determines whether a style remains

³² Walter Pater, *Appreciations, With an Essay on Style* (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006), pp. 10–17.

³³ Pater, pp. 16–17.

³⁴ Beach, p. 52.

³⁵ G.S. Fraser, ‘Macaulay’s Style as an Essayist’, in *Victorian Literature: Selected Essays*, ed. by Robert O. Preyer (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 2.

³⁶ Fraser, p. 2.

vivid and available, but what of the ‘machinery’ of style ‘still works’.³⁷ Some period styles take on relevance and vitality; others do not; they become dated and unusable. This situation varies over time so that what was once deemed dead can be revived. It may be possible, for example, to write (plausibly) in Ruskin’s style (again) at some future date.

2. Poetic Style

What is poetic style? It is hard to say. As Marjorie Boulton has written (in a book dedicated to the Apocalyptic poet Henry Treece), ‘the things that are most interesting and most worth having are impossible to define’.³⁸ As Hulme has written, ‘The great difficulty in any talk about art lies in the extreme indefiniteness of the vocabulary you are obliged to employ.’³⁹

One of the complicating factors in discussing poetic style is that style is one of those words it is assumed everyone already knows the meaning of.⁴⁰ The various meanings of the word ‘style’ foreshadow the confusion that can attend discussions of style in literary criticism. Middleton Murry notes the challenges of a critic considering style in *The Problem of Style*:

A discussion of the word Style, if it were pursued with only a fraction of the rigour of a scientific investigation would inevitably cover the whole of literary aesthetics and the theory of criticism. Six books would not suffice for the attempt: much less would six lectures.⁴¹

³⁷ Fraser, p. 2.

³⁸ Marjorie Boulton, *The Anatomy of Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 1.

³⁹ T.E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924), p. 143.

⁴⁰ According to the OED style is both a noun and a verb. It is, among other things: 1) an ancient implement for writing on wax; 2) a pointer, as on a sundial; 3) a written work; a literary or oral composition. Its eighth meaning is the one that mostly concerns us here: a) ‘The characteristic manner of literary expression of a particular writer, school, period, etc.’ b) ‘(Features pertaining to) the form and mode of expression of a text, as opp. to what is said or expressed.’ c) ‘A manner of speaking or conversing.’ However, consider the complicating eleventh meaning, a) ‘A mode or manner of living or behaving; a person’s bearing or demeanour (rare before the 18th century).’ Then again, the thirteenth meaning complicates the picture further: a) ‘Elegance, refinement, or excellence of manner, expression, form, or performance.’ b) ‘Fashionableness, attractiveness, or flamboyance of appearance, bearing, etc.’

⁴¹ J. Middleton Murry, *The Problem of Style* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 3.

A discussion of style in poetry is found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where, discussing diction, he writes: 'Every word is either current, or strange, or metaphorical, or ornamental, or newly-coined, or lengthened, or contracted, or altered.'⁴² He then goes on to say that, 'the perfection of style is to be clear without being mean'.⁴³

Aristotle makes a distinction between a 'clear style' that is too plain because it uses only current, proper words; and a 'lofty style' that uses only unusual words, and is therefore 'either a riddle or a jargon'.⁴⁴ Aristotle recommends that, 'a certain infusion, therefore, of these elements is necessary to style; for the strange (or rare) word, the metaphorical, the ornamental [...] will raise it above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous'.⁴⁵

Debates about poetic diction and style, in English, have, over the last several centuries, been manifold, and tended to oscillate, between preference of either a plainer or a more ornamental style, following the general style spectrum first outlined by Aristotle, with the emphasis often placed on which style was more truthful, as Marks shows in his study, *Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory Since the Renaissance*. On the issue of mannerism, Marks writes:

Whether a prior disposition to unalloyed candour guarantees stylistic excellence, or a prior determination to write well precludes any incursion of disingenuousness into the product, is unclear. With at least one critic it seems to be the latter case. It is impossible, Northrop Frye concluded of a kind of 'poetic' prose many other readers also disrelish, 'to tell the truth in Macaulay's style.' On this premise, perhaps more cogently than on any other, mannerism is deprecated, including the neoclassical poetic diction in which Wordsworth finds nothing more objectionable than its falsity, and so inaugurated poetic sincerity as the cardinal virtue of poetic style. And here we meet another paradox, which for those who stress the conventionality of all poetry becomes a dilemma. What is called mannerism is simply one or another conventional mode of expression, and this in itself can hardly be considered mendacious.⁴⁶

Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short observe that style has 'suffered from overdefinition, and the history of literary and linguistic thought is littered with unsuccessful attempts

⁴² Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. by S.H. Butcher, 4th edn (London: Macmillan, 1907; repr. 1922), p. 77.

⁴³ Aristotle, p. 81.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, p. 83.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, p. 83.

⁴⁶ Emerson R. Marks, *Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory Since the Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 20.

to attach a precise meaning to it'.⁴⁷ For our purposes, what can be agreed upon is that the basic units of poetic style are syntax and diction. This relationship, between the grammatical 'flow' of the line, and the words chosen, is still important for critics.

Angela Leighton writes of Walter Pater's style that his 'real gift lies not so much in what he says, however, which is often second-hand paraphrase, but in the way he says it. His own style flows like the stream he describes, taking the subject away from itself, on a journey of wandering, shifting clauses, which end up, not saving but losing the thing in question.'⁴⁸ It is of the nature of style that it remains, in one sense, ineffable, a matter of tropes, of poetic description – it is 'the way he says it' – and that opens the door to various ways of thinking about sincerity, as Camlot does.

There are arguably more rigorous ways to think about, and analyse, poetic style, which move into the realm of linguistics and stylistics, and which are mainly beyond the scope of this thesis. Walter Jackson Bate's *The Stylistic Development of Keats*, first published in 1945, is an example of an engaged study that offers these sorts of comparison: that Keats has a 34 per cent rate of using a caesura after the fifth syllable ('late and feminine') while Hunt has a 30 per cent rate.⁴⁹

Does style make the poet, or does the poet make the style? Does the poet conform their style to nature or use their will to transform the style? The linguistic theories of style and choice called monism, dualism, and pluralism explore these questions, and seek to answer them.⁵⁰

The New Critics were monists, claiming the unity of style and content.⁵¹ In thinking of the poetry of the high modernist style, though, it might be best to think dualistically – that is, to consider style as separable from meaning; this is the so-called fallacy of paraphrase. In this thesis, I will be adopting the contemporary dualist position of Richard Ohmann, who argues:

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short, *Style in Fiction*, 2nd edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007), p. 31.

⁴⁸ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 90.

⁴⁹ Walter Jackson Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1958), p. 15.

⁵⁰ Leech, pp. 9–33.

⁵¹ Leech, p. 21.

The attack on a dichotomy of form and content has been persistent in modern criticism; to change so much as a word, the argument runs, is to change the meaning as well. This austere doctrine has a certain theoretical appeal [...] Yet at the same time this doctrine leads to the altogether counterintuitive conclusion that there can be no such thing as style, or that style is simply a part of content.⁵²

The New Critical climate would explain why poets like F.T. Prince, influenced by the Renaissance and interested in rhetoric, could have had their work misread in a monist light.

Let us consider the final line from the celebrated Yeats poem, 'The Second Coming': 'Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.'⁵³ The monist argument would be that this line cannot be paraphrased; that the style of the line is indivisible from its total poetic meaning. Indeed, the metre, the alliteration (the 'b's) and the way that 'Bethlehem' suggests the word 'mayhem' are all intrinsic to an understanding of the poem. This, though, is somewhat tautological – since all words have meaning, word choice (diction), a key part of style, will always have an effect on style and semantic content. From Ohmann's position, however, it is possible to see how Yeats could have written otherwise. W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. would disagree, as he argues in *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson*, that 'different words make different meanings'.⁵⁴

My own experience as a poet is that the editing process is such that poems go through many drafts, offering many alternate versions; while a compositional urgency may present itself at the outset, and certain precepts, beliefs, aesthetic values and even moral ones will press upon the poet in the act of creative writing, creative editing at a certain stage takes over.

While a final, published poem may offer to the world a seemingly inviolable text, the variants and earlier drafts strongly suggest that some form of dualism (or pluralism), not monism, is more apt to the creative process, where poets weigh and are aware of creative options and alternatives, all the way through the editing process, until a final text is produced, presumably (though not always) for publication. Even then, revisions are often made; Auden's infamous alterations to his early poems is a case in point. If the monist were correct then any change to a poem would be the destruction of that poem, and the generation of an entirely new one.

⁵² Leech, p. 19.

⁵³ W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: CRW Publishing, 2010), p. 260.

⁵⁴ W.K. Wimsatt Jr., *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 9.

Identity does not work quite like this; we continue to be ourselves, even if parts of us change or fall away.

Indeed, if poems were expressions of the only way that something could be expressed, they would lack, to my mind, the force of intelligent design, and be merely the outpourings of an inspired visionary more like a scribe for the Muses; yet even Yeats, as we know, wrote many drafts. Consider Yeats's line above, rewritten as follows: 'Staggers towards the manger to give birth.' No meaning is lost here, though the poetic style is less impressive. No loss, but change, as in poetic translation. We have the sense of the monstrosity moving to the nativity scene, pregnant with a second coming. Style is of interest insofar as style 'consists in choices made from the repertoire of the language'.⁵⁵ Without choice there is no style.

Forties Style poems tend to be misread often because, from a New Critical perspective, they *are* 'excessive' to the extent that the stylistic effects, the diction, the syntax, appear to be 'extra-poetic'; the irony being that, for the monist, the single-purpose alignment of form and content recommends a certain compact tension of textual presentation; poems that seem ornate, verbose, off-kilter, uneven, with meaning or style beyond the apparent 'meaning', are read as 'bad poems' – as opposed to merely poems whose complexity is dualistic. Post-structural theories of literature tend to emphasise that there can be no identification of a text with a unified meaning. The slippery, ambiguous and ever-changing textuality of poems is better understood by recognising that the relationship between style and meaning is, more or less, arbitrary.

I wish now to turn briefly to one of the most significant contemporary critical works on poetic style, *Milton's Grand Style*. Christopher Ricks uses the terms 'Milton's style', 'the Miltonic style' and 'the Grand Style'.⁵⁶ There is an intriguing ambiguity about the term 'Milton's style' worth considering. Depending on where one puts the emphasis, one means something very different: is it, then, *Milton's style* or Milton's *style*?

The first, I think, is much more of a contemporary idea of style, and suggests the meaning of the word that implies the individual, Milton, in possession of a unique 'voice', or something original, or idiosyncratic, to think and say. The second puts the manner more on to style as a public option – that is, a rhetorical concept –

⁵⁵ Leech, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

that aspect of eloquence that can be defined, according to rhetoric's laws, in various ways. Since we know that Ricks's concern is with the nature of Milton's use of *the* grand style (not *a* grand style), we can infer that it is a style borrowed, and not bespoke. It is, indeed, the style that 'deliberately does not limit itself to the vernacular' and as such is connected, according to Ricks, to Homer, the Bible, and a certain 'European dignity'.⁵⁷ This, one might say, is hardly a style at all, in the sense of sounding like one's self (if the self is said to be vernacular), in sounding a personality.

So, Eliot's and Leavis's chief criticisms of Milton's style are nearly tautological – for their criticism that such a style doesn't correspond to actual speech or thought rather beats the horse for not being a dog (to coin a phrase). Of course, it won't, exactly, because ordinary speech *is* vernacular by definition, not rhetorical, in the sense of being learnedly allusive. I am not trying to defend Milton's style here, so much as to indicate how a critic who first sets out to think of style in general will often delimit how they are able to consider an individual poet's style in particular.

What I hope I have begun to show is that, far from being a natural or certain element of poetry solidly and generally agreed upon, style in poetry, or rather, poetic style, remains a problematic and slippery term – therefore allowing poets and critics to sometimes speak at cross-purposes about what it is that actually delights or upsets them when they write and speak of poetry, with style in mind. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at how the Forties Style, as a period style, has been read.

⁵⁷ Ricks, p. 22.

CHAPTER 2:

PERIOD STYLE AND THE FORTIES

A neutral tone is nowadays preferred

– Donald Davie, ‘Remembering the Thirties’

Of course, the canon of Camp can change

– Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on Camp’

Cleanth Brooks, writing of the way in which modern poets borrowed from the metaphysical period, argued that:

the ‘metaphysical’ quality of the best of the moderns is not the result of a revival, or the aping of a period style. The fundamental resemblance is in the attitude which the poets of both periods take toward their materials and in the method which both, at their best, employ.⁵⁸

This distinction between reviving or aping a period style, on the one hand, and the sharing of an ‘attitude’ on the other, is worth considering, though it is easier to chart resemblances of style than infer the ‘attitudes’ behind the texts. There is something potentially reactionary about attempting to go back to older styles and periods, as if one could merely, unproblematically, take up (cherry-pick) the good, without also considering the bad. Or, indeed, the experiences and ideologies of the time. This is certainly what Jerome J. McGann has in mind, when he writes, in *The Romantic Ideology*:

The works of Romantic art, like the works of any historical moment, ‘transcend’ their particular socio-historical position only because they are completely incorporated to that position, only because they have localized themselves. In this fact we observe that paradox fundamental to all works of art which is best revealed through an historical method of

⁵⁸ Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 53

criticism: because they are so completely true to themselves, because they are time and place specific, because they are – from our point of view – *different*.⁵⁹

These differences can, I believe, be overstated. The interwar period is now the subject of revaluation not because it is entirely alien to us, but because the period continues to suggest a contemporary relevance, if only because the current socio-political moment in Britain is also fraught with social unrest, austerity and wars. Still, when I argue for a trans-historical role for the Forties Style, I am by no means recommending a wholesale adoption of the attendant ‘attitudes’ or ‘ideologies’ of the Forties – not least because it is unclear to me that poets always make their decisions about ‘poetic effects’ for the ideological reasons that are claimed for them.

Or, put another way, it is possible to access aspects of style, arguably not for the original reasons that style was first employed. Charles Bernstein claims that:

I mean to see the formal dynamics of a poem as communicative exchanges, as socially addressed, and as ideologically explicit. And, squinting to bring that into view, focus on the sometimes competing, sometimes reinforcing realms of convention and authority, persuasion and rhetoric, sincerity and conviction. For many a person has been convicted thanks to too much sincerity and not enough rhetoric, too much persuasion and not enough authority.⁶⁰

As such, he claims (using the metaphor of style as clothing that is so prevalent):

I am not suggesting switching from an uptight business suit into sincere jeans, as if to re-enact the fallacy of Romantic authenticity; but rather acting out, in dialectical play, the insincerity of form as well as content. Such poetic play does not open into a neat opposition of dry high irony and wet lyric expressiveness but, in contrast, collapses into a more ambivalent, destabilizing field of pathos, the ludicrous, schtick, sarcasm; a multidimensional textual field that is congenitally unable to maintain an evenness of surface tension or a flatness of affect, where linguistic shards of histrionic inappropriateness pierce the momentary calm of an obscure twist of phrase, before cantering into the next available trope; less a shield than a probe.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Bernstein, p. 237.

⁶¹ Bernstein, p. 237.

This is as good a definition of Bernstein's postmodern language school poetics as we might need, and it is clearly aimed at deconstructing the organic sense of the modern poem as a unified perfect work held in tension. It also emphasises the alternate sense of the poem as a work of textual artifice and formal paradox, ironically seeking to speak an ideological preference (an *attitude* in Brooks's words) for disorder versus order in the poetic realm. It feels, in some ways, a little like Forties Style.

The Movement established itself by treating as its Aunt Sally a version of a style, the Apocalyptic, it did not like.⁶² In the process, the Movement achieved a double-win – it painted the Forties as having one basic unwelcome style and presented itself as the antidote alternative style for the Fifties.

Whereas there is one pressure on poets to make it new and find the pulse of their time, there is also an alternative pressure to resist the historical nature of style, or, perhaps, to wilfully master that history, by returning to older styles, for new purposes. F.T. Prince's belated appreciation of Walt Whitman's style hindered his critical reception in Britain – yet ironically created interest abroad – exposing the variety of desires and tastes at work in poetic reception. There is a difference between pastiche, homage, influence (strong or weak) – and a deliberate choice to work in a certain style, one that might be very different from one's own time or place.

For Marjorie Perloff, poetic modernism requires a new critical reading:

We often forget just how short-lived the avant-garde phase of modernism really was. In textbooks and university courses, as in museum classifications and architectural surveys, 'modernism' is a catch-all term that refers to the literature and art produced up to the war years of the 1940s. [...] A poet like Delmore Schwartz [...] may have thought of himself as the heir of Eliot, but between the initiatory force of Eliot's 'awful daring of a moment's surrender' and Schwartz's 'Eliotic' style, something pivotal has given way. Indeed, between the two world wars (and well beyond the second one) it almost seems as if poems and art works made a conscious effort to repress the technological and formal inventions of modernism at its origins.⁶³

⁶² As Blake Morrison clearly shows in his study, *The Movement*.

⁶³ Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The 'New' Poetics* (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), p. 3.

My concern with Perloff's argument here is that it tends to make of 'modernism at its origins' a year zero; and all other poetic styles of the period 1910–1950 mere repression of her version of what poetry needs to be in the twentieth century. It also fails to see the complex relationship between the Forties poets and early forms of arch-lyricism, itself a viable form of modernism.

Jennifer Ashton considers that Perloff's reading of Eliot's early poetry, her statement that 'the modern/postmodern divide has emerged as more apparent than real' is a dangerous one, and untrue. She feels it necessary to police the borders of these two periods of poetic styles: 'the modern/postmodern divide remains intact, both historically and theoretically'; indeed, she wishes to 'alter the currently received history of twentieth-century American poetry by showing that Stein and (Riding) Jackson have been and continue to be misunderstood as postmodernists *avant la lettre*'.⁶⁴

There are viable connections between twentieth-century British poetry, and that of earlier periods, such as late Victorian poetry and the American poetry of Whitman, whose poetics invade but are often denied entry to the public spaces of British poetic discourse and tradition, especially as it relates to the question of the period under discussion here.⁶⁵ Philip Hobsbaum, in his study *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry*, makes it clear that he does not consider Eliot an English poet, and that the American line from Whitman is alien to English poetic needs:

What English critics of the 1920s resisted in Eliot's verse, and in some cases denounced, was not the quality of its modernism. There is no world in which Eliot co-exists with Tzara, Dada and the Sitwells. It was not a young English poet the Georgians were fighting against, but a young American poet. Once this is taken into account, all becomes clear. *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday* cannot be related with any persuasiveness to English narrative precursors because there is no sense in which they can be termed English narrative poems. [...] But for my purpose it would be sufficient to show that Eliot had predecessors, and at least one of them very distinguished indeed; so that what has been termed 'modernity' in his work should rather be regarded as the development of a decidedly American tradition. Who, long before

⁶⁴ Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2.

⁶⁵ Notwithstanding D.H. Lawrence, deeply influenced by Whitman.

Eliot worked through evocative vibration, phanopeia, montage, free verse and the rest? The answer is Whitman.⁶⁶

This British evasion of the Whitman line (one that combines democratic enthusiasm of address, with an elevated rhetorical manner) allows for the modernist/anti-modernist struggle in British poetry to be portrayed as the conflict between a cosmopolitan and nativist modernism – between Eliot and William Carlos Williams – or later, between followers of the Pound/Olson branch versus the Hardy/Larkin line. But evasion of Whitman, as Alan Golding shows in *Outlaw to Classic*, was a commonplace of the New Critical position in America, as well, where the poet was seen as something of an embarrassment.⁶⁷

Ian Brinton, in his study *Contemporary Poetry: Poets and Poetry Since 1990*, emphasises the split between Eliot and William Carlos Williams as perhaps the defining struggle in modernism.⁶⁸ Mark Scroggins, in a chapter titled, significantly, ‘US Modernism II: The Other Tradition – Williams, Zukofsky and Olson’, explains that in ‘Williams’s wake, Louis Zukofsky and Charles Olson continued the experiments of this “home-grown” modernism, in the process pushing American poetry into a mode that Olson would name “postmodern”, explicitly stationing postmodern poetic development in the context of American, not British poetry’.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, Bonnie Costello, in ‘US Modernism I: Moore, Stevens and the Modernist Lyric’ makes an argument that Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore take the Romantic ‘lyric I’ and ‘scrutinise this expansive, romantic self and gauge its limits’.⁷⁰ As we shall see, Nicholas Moore and F.T. Prince were doing the same thing in Britain, but were not being recognised for it – because the master narrative of British/US modernisms did not permit such recognition.

As Drew Milne writes: ‘the work of modernist poets in the British Isles rarely fits the categories pioneered by Eliot’s Anglo-American modernism. Subsequent

⁶⁶ Philip Hobsbaum, *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 265–66.

⁶⁷ Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 92–93.

⁶⁸ Ian Brinton, *Contemporary Poetry: Poets and Poetry since 1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 13.

⁶⁹ Mark Scroggins, ‘US Modernism II: The Other Tradition – Williams, Zukofsky and Olson’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 181–94 (p. 181).

⁷⁰ Bonnie Costello, ‘US Modernism I: Moore, Stevens and the Modernist Lyric’, in *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* (see Scroggins, above) pp. 163–80 (p. 173).

constructions of national traditions which have sought to separate American and Irish poetry from English poetry have left the critical contexts for reading English and British poetry in some confusion.⁷¹ This confusion⁷² is confirmed by Redell Olsen, who writes that, although, ‘there is some overlap between poets represented in anthologies of British poetry since 1980, what is most striking is the divergence between them that marks an important and decisive split in post-war poetry in Britain. Poets from both groupings have been termed “postmodern”’.⁷³

Ian Gregson has noted the confusion that can arise when using the term postmodernism: ‘The complexity of postmodernism as a term has been compounded by its overuse. Critics and reviewers of contemporary British poetry have tended to employ it merely to gesticulate towards a number of various, and sometimes contradictory developments.’⁷⁴ He notes how the word was used by Morrison and Motion in the introduction to their *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, applying it to poets like Paul Muldoon, James Fenton and Seamus Heaney; but that in America John Ashbery was definitely considered postmodernist by the 1970s, and the most important figure.⁷⁵

More than just a debate between literary terms or period labels, the questions surrounding what period a poet falls within have relevance for how they will be read and received; poets consigned to periods of little contemporary relevance are rendered, de facto, less relevant. In terms of mid-century English-language poetry, this also becomes a confusion over nationalism, internationalism and what was just becoming the post-colonial space (Canadian modernist poets of this period, such as A.M. Klein, remain invisible in such discussions still, it seems).

The reason this is so is partly to do with critical reception, with becoming canonical. As Jason Harding notes, the ‘process by which canonical reputations are made is more finely grained, subtly contextualised, and gradual, than many literary

⁷¹ Drew Milne, ‘Modernist Poetry in the British Isles’, in *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* (see Scroggins, above), pp. 147–62 (p. 156).

⁷² My argument that the Forties Style is ambiguously placed between poetic modernisms and postmodernisms is therefore unduly complicated by the fact that in Britain the word postmodern has been co-opted by a poetic mainstream, whereas in America it is used for more experimental sorts of poetry.

⁷³ Redell Olsen, ‘Postmodern Poetry in Britain’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. by Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 42–55 (p. 42).

⁷⁴ Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism, Dialogue and Estrangement* (London: Macmillan, 1996) p. 209.

⁷⁵ Gregson, p. 213.

critics with ideological axes to grind, acknowledge'.⁷⁶ Poets who find themselves relegated to the wrong side of whatever side is in fashion simply don't receive the same level of serious study, attention, or appreciation.

At stake during this modern poetics debate, according to Charles Altieri,⁷⁷ was a struggle over poetic rhetoric, and how modernist poetry – apparently cleansed by Pound of late Victorian diction – could continue to, in actuality, engage with deeply romantic, often eloquent, practices, extending many of the styles and concerns of the Victorian, 'fin-de-siècle' and Georgian periods in the process; with, perhaps, this major difference – ideas of the metaphysical, complexity and irony, having been merged with Wilde's sense of paradox,⁷⁸ allowed an undercurrent of heterodoxy to prevail, at a time when, more officially, only one or two dominant streams prevailed. By bracketing out 'American' from 'British' poetry, one disfigures the picture, or cooks the books.

Styles used to establish historical periods are both convenient, and problematic, markers. We have grown familiar with period style labels like Romantic, modern, Movement. Period styles are arguably defined by an individual poetic style, which becomes popular or prevalent enough to inspire indirect and direct imitation, to lesser and greater degrees.⁷⁹ Style, then, even when personal is never, as it were, a private language. Style, like language, is shared. Certain poets, in this way, become style markers. The Eliotic, the Audenesque, and the Larkinesque, are all instances of this.

What is missing for the Forties period is a dominant style based on a single poet: there is no Prince style referred to by critics, for example; even Dylan Thomas seems unable to encompass the full depth and width of the Forties. This absence of a defining or definitive period style marker is usually seen as a period failing (lack of major poet), but it is also an opportunity. It allows the creative critic to follow Wittgenstein's example, and look, instead, for 'family resemblances' between the Forties poets and their styles. In this way, a less reductive and more positive Forties

⁷⁶ Jason Harding, 'Modernist Poetry and the Canon', in *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* (see Scroggins, above), pp. 225–43 (p. 225).

⁷⁷ Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 53.

⁷⁸ This is ably evidenced by Scholes in his book *Paradox of Modernism*.

⁷⁹ The idea of a signature style seems to locate itself between art and writing, between, as it were, the visual and the verbal arts – style, then, is potentially rhetorical, potentially physical (as a signature would be).

Style can be identified; one that is derived from a reading of different poets, that nonetheless comprehends what does (however loosely) link them.

J.A. Burrow pioneered this form of periodisation of apparently dissimilarly styled poets, when he created the literary term ‘Ricardian poetry’ in his study of the same name. Despite the diversity in style, dialect, form and metre of the four poets of the period he identified (Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain Poet) he was able to posit and usefully study a Ricardian style.⁸⁰ This establishes a useful precedent for my dissertation’s attempt to bolster the literary term Forties Style and make it fit for robust use. Burrow writes of this heterodox project that it is:

[...] not the description of a single developed and clearly-articulated style which can stand with the metaphysical and Augustan styles as one of the stable achievements of English poetry. I shall attempt a theory rather than a description; and I shall try to show that the common, the Ricardian, characteristics in the style of these poets reside, not in any stable set of particular features such as a ‘school’ might cultivate, but rather in a relationship between the poet and his medium.⁸¹

Is the Forties Style Danto’s style of styles? If so, this links the Forties period to Danto’s vision of the postmodern condition in contemporary art practice, but with the one beguiling and curious difference – this style of styles explored in the Forties – though clearly the forerunner of aspects of later poetics – fails to usher in a new age for poetry, but is repressed by the Fifties. The great period of modernist style in poetry was followed, then, by style in a minor key.

Too often the option on offer from critics studying the post-war period has been a severe British late modernism that follows a line from Pound to Bunting and the American Olson on to the Cambridge Poets (J.H. Prynne), or a postmodernism that follows a mainstream from Larkin on to Armitage, Duffy and Paterson. Neither is especially charmed by flamboyant arch-lyricism.

Drew Milne, in his essay ‘Neo-Modernism and Avant-Garde Orientations’, collected in the recent *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, presents a contemporary avant-garde position that might be said to contradict my

⁸⁰ J.A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain Poet* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971; repr. London: Penguin Books, 1992).

⁸¹ Burrow, pp. 11–12.

thesis (Milne, as the reader will see, does not see the Forties as a time of great poetic promise, and uses the rationing trope that Donald Davie first used in the 1950s):

Amid the rubble left by World War II, the possibilities for avant-garde developments in Britain and Ireland were severely rationed. [...] W.H. Auden, another émigré, became a US citizen in 1946. His subsequent poetry erred towards eclectic variousness, a source for what became known as ‘New York school Poetry,’ but scarcely registered by those working through the ruins of European Modernism. [...] Dylan Thomas’s post-war collection *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) reflected experiences of war and the dissipation of the few surviving modernist and surrealist affiliations in his work. [...] Conservative anti-modernisms, by contrast, have preferred an empirically reduced, commonsensical poetic subjectivity, involving anecdotal epiphanies and minor transcendences of the everyday. [...] T.S. Eliot’s poetry and poetic paradigms were exhausted, producing nothing of substance after *Four Quartets* (1943). [...] Modernism in Britain never made it out of the bunkers of the war.⁸²

What is important about this passage is that it not only mirrors the anti-Forties perspective of ‘conservative anti-modernism’ from the experimental side, but that it demonstrates how, as recently as 2009, it was possible for a British poet-critic to see very little of promise from the period I wish to validate. Milne’s argument here is a bit dismissively polemical. It is hard to think of Auden’s post-war poetry as ‘erring’ insofar as it did indeed inspire an entire generation of (mostly American) poets; only a very parochial perspective could see that as flying off course. As Bonnie Costello shows us, for instance, Elizabeth Bishop ‘absorbed his style’, and ‘certain topics and themes became associated, through Auden, with certain stylistic moves’.⁸³

Further, to claim that Thomas’s later poetry is a ‘dissipation’ of his modernist/surrealist affiliations is to surely misread his later poetry and playwriting, which, despite some tendencies towards greater clarity, remained, by the standards of the Movement credo, hardly anti-modernist. Finally, it seems true that, while Eliot did not write much major poetry after *Four Quartets*, the paradigm of that work remains the gold standard of later modernist arch-lyricism, and can hardly be said to have been exhausted, not least because of the way in which poets like Prince and

⁸² Drew Milne, ‘Neo-Modernism and Avant-Garde Orientations’, in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Nigel Alderman and C.D. Blanton (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), pp. 155–75 (pp. 155–57).

⁸³ Bonnie Costello, ‘“A Whole Climate of Opinion”: Auden’s Influence on Bishop’, in *Something We Have That They Don’t: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925*, ed. by Steve Clark and Mark Ford (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), pp. 98–117 (p. 111).

Tiller developed it. Finally, it is blatantly obvious that Milne fails to properly value the work of Lynette Roberts, Nicholas Moore, or W.S. Graham produced in the immediate post-war environment, all of which was certainly no dissipation in the rubble.

I argue (contra Milne's perspective) that there was, and is, a third option, that was present at precisely the rupture between modern/postmodern in the Long Forties – that was a hybrid of both alternate lines, and, more besides, that made it out of the bunkers.

Marina MacKay has written that, 'despite tremendous recuperative work by recent surveys of this long neglected period, little of the war's literature has ever fully registered on the critical field of vision'.⁸⁴ MacKay, in her study *Modernism and World War II*, terms the war period 'late modernism' and sees the literature of this time very much linked to the politics of the war years. She also sees this, like Milne, as a time of decline, though not with such a sense of chagrin: '[I]f I begin this book by saying that its subject is the end of modernism, I mean "end" in Eliot's double sense: the end of modernism signified both its resolution and dissolution.' MacKay does not answer the question, if modernism ends in 1945, what replaces it, before the Movement, in the mid Fifties, other than to suggest post-colonial thinking, or, in Jed Esty's phrase, 'the anthropological turn'.⁸⁵

The Long Forties becomes a sort of curious wasteland of fag-ends and spent options. Not much criticism explores why in the post-war period, of the late 1940s and early 1950s, criticism should have shifted its attention completely from being the Age of Dylan Thomas to that of Larkin, and why it never became the Age of F.T. Prince, or Nicholas Moore. Esty's study, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*, posits the view that, as Britain's post-imperial decline set in, late modernism became complicit in the rise of an 'Anglocentric culture paradigm'.⁸⁶ Though Moore and Prince are not discussed by Esty, it is possible to infer from his study that poetry strongly influenced by the American poetic style (Whitman, Stevens), written by marginal figures (a South African in Prince's case), would have had a hard time competing with the Englishness of the Movement. Esty's

⁸⁴ Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁸⁵ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 1–22.

⁸⁶ Esty, p. 2.

groundbreaking study exemplifies a tendency in recent criticism of this contested liminal period of wartime/post-war mid-century British literature (a tendency I attempt to deviate from somewhat in this thesis), which is to focus on grander historical and theoretical narratives at the expense of actually reading (sometimes marginalised or forgotten) figures from the period.

There are many 'Forties' of course. Every decade is complex and multiple, time and history being what they are. The 1940s were a decade marked by global war, the defeat of Axis fascism, the enlargement of the Soviet sphere of influence, the death camps, and the use of nuclear weapons. Even now, historical and political debates rage as to the meaning of 1 September 1939, and the implications of all that followed. The decade was split in 1945 by the war's end and the growing experience of a post-colonial era, as Britain's empire imploded under the war debt. Churchill lost to Labour, and Austerity Britain ushered in the NHS. The decade of the 1940s, for the British, then, was more than a little divided – at times very dangerous, at other times more than a little dull or trying (rationing).

This aspect of a radical division in tone and tenor was not just a divide that occurred in mid decade. Rather, the entire period under consideration is irradiated with this kind of intense ambiguity. For instance, some of the most famous poems of World War II, by Henry Reed, Prince and Alun Lewis, offer reflections on soldiers not in the midst of battle, but either being trained for it, or waiting for it, often in transit, or – as in the case of Keith Douglas, in 'Cairo Jag', on leave. Or, in the Blitz poems of Dylan Thomas, David Jones, and the war poems of various women poets, such as Lynette Roberts, death and the domestic are aligned, if not allied.

During the war the intense admixture of emotion and experience might best be described as low-grade anxiety – or occupational mania.⁸⁷ Euphoria and fear were intermingled, so that apprehension gave way to gay abandon, and then to mundane work. Of course, after the war, fear of death diminished, but other anxieties replaced it, as the cold war developed and financial and status crises (in Britain) replaced earlier certainties.

The stylistic achievements of the 1940s, in art, film, radio and popular music, reflected this. The 'St Ives School', for instance, attempted to link expression and

⁸⁷ This is explored well in Lyndsey Stonebridge's *The Writing of Anxiety*.

abstraction. In America, but much influenced by English, Irish and European writers, Orson Welles' work of the 1940s, such as *Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and *The Lady from Shanghai*, echoed the baroque, flamboyant and stylish manner of the period's poetry. This was a period of the emergence of a new kind of art form – the popular mass media.

Dylan Thomas was the dominant poet of this modern period to actively enter into the production of objects for the culture industry.⁸⁸ Other poets had been popular before (Byron comes to mind) – but few, if any, had recorded best-selling long-playing albums, a format allowed by new technology. Thomas was, in some ways, the first 'radio poet', though Auden and Louis MacNeice, among others, also worked at and recorded programmes for the BBC, notably as propaganda exercises.

Thomas was famous in large part owing to his compelling broadcasts and recordings, where he read his own and other poets' poems; this was a new way of the writer literally extending their voice, across distances no public appearance could hope to match. Thomas's reputation has since paid dearly (in some quarters) for his work's intrusion into other media than that of the printed word.

It would not be surprising if his extraordinary media success generated more than a little envy, among fellow poets, most of whom enjoyed but a fraction of his renown – though the main reasons for a swing to anti-Thomas sentiments was connected to more profound positions, and beliefs, about the nature and role of poetry in England, as we shall see in the next chapter.

So, the 1940s is a period that was radically destabilised, socially and politically, by war and new technology, and its culture, from the literary to the mass-popular, is implicated in these shifts and profoundly marked by them. The 1940s is the decade of the twentieth century that first demonstrates something of the changes, in communication, lifestyle, culture, society and politics, that were to become known as the 'postmodern'. The Forties are the moment when the modern and what comes next remain most intimately (because not entirely differentiated) connected.

Given the recent studies expressing and exploring the heterodoxy of modernism, and a general critical interest in the idea of pluralist modernisms, it is perplexing that the Forties poets, rather than becoming exemplary of problematical

⁸⁸ Adorno did not write on the recordings of Dylan Thomas, alas. However, Giles Goodland has written of Thomas in the light of Adorno, 'owing to his dual commitment to poetry and film, to mass and modernist culture'. G.R. Goodland, 'Modernist Poetry and Film of the Home Front, 1939–45' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford University, Jesus College, 1992), p. 264.

modernism, have tended instead to face a critical pincer movement, from warring factions. Both the school of poet-critics associated with the dominant mainstream movement of the period directly following on from the Forties, the Movement, and those ‘late modernists’ most directly opposed to the Movement and its views on language and poetics, at best neglected, and often, vilified, aspects and elements of style most associated with the Forties (rhetorical flourish, florid style, surrealism, emotionality) – though for ostensibly different reasons.⁸⁹

By virtue of being either ignored, lambasted or actively suppressed by some of the dominant poet-critics of both the major perspectives in post-war British poetry (until quite recently), some poets of the 1940s tended to be undervalued, misjudged, and, indeed, misunderstood; they fell between critical schools. Perhaps more damaging still – yet also more subtle – was the attempt, by some poet-critics, to defend aspects of the Forties legacy, but in ways that also continued to demonise or take at face value earlier evaluative positions.

The neo-Romantic tendency of the Forties was a response to the impersonalism of Eliot, and the political discursive style of the Audenesque, and was also related to English surrealism.⁹⁰ The rhetoricity of the Forties work was not new; as discussed previously, such arch-lyricism was seen in Crane, Yeats and Stevens. But what was different, I think, were the nascent glimmers of a new mixing of elements in this late modern period – a mixing that sometimes confused readers less familiar with shifting levels of tone and diction, or form and content.

John Bayley, generally sympathetic to Dylan Thomas in *The Romantic Survival*, has noted the difficulty of appreciating the poetry of Thomas, due to his apparent combination of the antithetical styles of the 17th and 19th centuries, the metaphysical and the romantic; for ‘Thomas’s use of language is not simply good at some points and bad at others’ but rather ‘a hit-or-miss method’ so that ‘the wholeness of the poem remains difficult to grasp’.⁹¹ And subsequently this leads Bayley to suggest that ‘we still do not know whether language is capable of what he tried to do with it’, which raises the extraordinary possibility that Thomas had in fact

⁸⁹ There is a streak of Protestant austerity in British, particularly English, critical circles that has long found excessively flamboyant poetic effects less appealing than plain ones.

⁹⁰ Michel Remy, *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999).

⁹¹ John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution* (London: Constable and Company, 1957), pp. 195–196.

exceeded the language limit, as it were; in the light of postmodern poetics, this seems far-fetched, but it certainly shows how aspects of Forties Style could bewitch, bother and bewilder some readers, even the very brightest.⁹²

The usual argument, that the Movement style was a direct response to the Forties Style is convenient, but too simple; the Movement poets were Forties poets, too – and they never entirely shook free of that decade, or the poetic traditions of modernism. MacKay has pointed to the strong continuities in the work of Larkin's style with the World War II mood: 'this anti-transcendent, concessionary development [consensus politics] makes it possible to see where the subdued and deflationary ironies of post-war English writing came from'.⁹³

Forties poetry was concerned with form, as all modernist poetry was, but often more intensely infused with emotionality and drama (sometimes melodrama) – making for a potent stylistic mix. It was often also infused with religious faith (in an increasingly secular world, especially post-war), as in its most famous long poem, *Four Quartets*. For some British critics, this made for an uncomfortable mix, since the abandonment of a plain or plainer style, and expression of intensely personal visions or experiences of the carnal and divine seemed to go against the more puritanical, even stoical, virtues upon which the native English character was presumed, by some, to be based.⁹⁴

The main reason some, or much, of the work of the time is now considered to be minor, or to have failed, is that what is perceived as the heightened mannerism of the period seems unpalatable. Critics like Donald Davie, who had written *Purity of Diction* at a crucial moment, argued for a more responsible line of poetry, derived from the example of Thomas Hardy. The Forties period became typified as infantile, or immature – a liminal stage best moved beyond, and quickly – and, for poets as different as W.S. Graham and Philip Larkin, this became part of the narrative trajectory for the 'development' of their own work. Tony Lopez sees them as linked: '[b]oth Graham and Larkin re-invented themselves as poets, making drastic changes

⁹² Bayley, p. 196.

⁹³ MacKay, p. 13.

⁹⁴ As Margaret R. Graver's study *Stoicism and Emotion* shows, it was possible to be a stoic thinker and emotional – the key was, perhaps, to enjoy a various and flexible type of irony – as I think Empson did.

in their styles of writing, so that these early poems [...] would not seem typical of either of them at their best'.⁹⁵

Forties Style has not been entirely friendless since 1950, however. It has enjoyed something of an extended shelf life by being appreciated by a coterie of discerning poets, who, I suspect, have often enjoyed the camp nature of the work as much as anything; and have also been happy to appreciate work even if it is minor, and sometimes because it is minor.

It is not surprising that poets of the Forties have long been popular among gay poets. Camp taste often prizes work precisely because it is not popular with certain critics, or because it is popular among a certain in-crowd, almost as an in-joke. As Susan Sontag observed, camp taste isn't just homosexual in origin, but it is strongly led by homosexual taste.⁹⁶ It is worth considering whether Forties Style is camp, or can be appreciated by camp taste, insofar as Sontag identifies some aspects of it in her notes:

1. To start very generally: Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization. 2. To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. [...] 18. One must distinguish between naive and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naive. [...] 28. Again, Camp is the attempt to do something extraordinary, glamorous. [...] 31. This is why so many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out of date, *démodé*. It's not a love of the old as such. It's simply that the process of aging, of deterioration provides the necessary detachment – or arouses a necessary sympathy. [...] 34. Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement. [...] 40. Style is everything. [...] 41. The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.⁹⁷

It certainly seems possible to characterise my own appreciation of the flamboyant, glamorous poems of the Forties Style as relating to a tendency suggested by Sontag's notes. The poems themselves are not deliberately camp, they are naively so.

⁹⁵ Tony Lopez, *Meaning Performance: Essays on Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006), p. 98.

⁹⁶ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 290.

⁹⁷ Sontag, pp. 277–88.

Sympathy is raised. However, I am not sure it is possible to fully enjoy the Forties Style, as I am developing it, and to dethrone the serious, entirely; half the fun is in the seriousness, what's at stake. No, I want to be able to enjoy style, but not necessarily always and only playfully; but camp is certainly a close kinsman to what it is my taste envelops.

Beyond the question of a camp appreciation of the Forties Style, there is an ongoing mid-Atlantic tendency, a cosmopolitan one, in 'New York School friendly' poets based in London and New York, favourable to some of the styles of the 1940s. I would include in this group poets such as Denise Riley, David Lehman, Mark Ford, Peter Robinson and John Ashbery. That is not all of the story, of course – but, the Forties do seem to have combined homoeroticism, emotionality, religiosity, lyricism, flamboyance, glamour and display in an unusually intense cocktail of the exotic and the eccentric.⁹⁸

The Forties Style lives on, and in fact has a life that can be detached from the period, and still accessed. Past styles – period styles – can become archaic, clichéd, or unusable. Or not, as Ezra Pound explored in his use of (among other styles) the archaic troubadour manner. From Eliot's recovery of the metaphysical poets, to Andrew Duncan's championing of often obscure and little-known lost poets, poet-critics and scholars have attempted to represent those aspects of the past that still appeal to them, and are – to them, still a part, or potentially a part, of the living stream as they see it.

⁹⁸ Of homo-eroticism in modern poetry see Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male homo-eroticism & modern poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

CHAPTER 3:

POETRY OF THE LONG DECADE AND DYLAN THOMAS

Arguably, Thomas has been the victim of an ill-considered response

– Edward Larissy

1. The Long Decade

The Forties as a literary period, at least with regards to poetry, is best understood as a historian's 'long decade' – one that stretches from just before the start of World War II, in 1938, and ends a year after the death in 1953 of the major new poet of the time, Dylan Thomas. My proposal to think of the decade in this way is in response to the usual critical fiction that (using the war's end as a definitive break) makes it two short decades, 1939–1945, and then the Labour post-war years, 1945–1951.

Poetry written in Britain was widely published and disseminated during World War II. This was partly for reasons unrelated to the poetry itself, as Valerie Holman shows,⁹⁹ but owing to war aims; what Robin Skelton, in his introduction to *Poetry of the Forties*, called 'The Poetry Boom'.¹⁰⁰ Though Holman admits book sales were down during the war years by more than 50 per cent, it was during this period that a certain style, the so-called 'New Romantic', familiar to readers of Dylan Thomas, George Barker, and W.S Graham, became popular among readers of poetry.¹⁰¹ As Skelton observed, this was a style that 'rediscovered the body', returning 'sensuality' to British poetry.¹⁰²

This style was finally challenged by two publications that helped to establish a decisive shift in the accepted poetic fashion of the time – Donald Davie's critical work of 1951, *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, and then the *New Lines* anthology of 1956, edited by Robert Conquest, which famously introduced the Movement poets (including Conquest, Davie, Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn) to a general British public, while dismissing the younger poets of the 1940s as representing 'the sort of

⁹⁹ Valerie Holman, *Print for Victory: Book Publishing in England 1939–1945* (London: British Library, 2008).

¹⁰⁰ *Poetry of the Forties*, ed. by Robin Skelton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Holman, p. 250.

¹⁰² Skelton, p. 28.

corruption that has affected the general attitude to poetry in the last decade'.¹⁰³ These 'corrupt' 1940s poets were the sort who 'love to listen to Negroes and Cossacks'.¹⁰⁴

The idea that the 1940s was a failed experiment for poetry has long been popular among critics and academics. A.T. Tolley writes in his study *The Poetry of the Forties* that 'the poetry of the forties [sic] seems not to belong. The whipping boy of *New Lines*, it emerges as an aberration from an age of mistakes.'¹⁰⁵

By 1950 most of the main literary journals of the 1940s had ceased publication. As Eric Homberger reminds us in *The Art of the Real: Poetry in England and America since 1939*, the 'collapse of the "market" [for poetry] after the war caught everyone by surprise.'¹⁰⁶ By 1949, sales of *Penguin New Writing* were down to 40,000, from a high of 100,000 in 1946; the series was wound up by Allen Lane in 1950.¹⁰⁷

This was a moment of notable transition in Britain. In 1951 the post-war Labour government of Clement Attlee was defeated by Winston Churchill. In 1952, Elizabeth II came to the throne. In 1953 Dylan Thomas died in New York. In 1954, food rationing ended in Britain. A recognisable socio-political, historical and literary period – that of World War II and its immediate aftermath, 'Austerity Britain' – with the rise of the welfare state was ending.¹⁰⁸

It is ironic or maybe just unlucky, then, that F.T. Prince chose this moment to publish another collection, *Soldiers Bathing*, in 1954, at precisely the moment when his exotic, war-themed, elegant style would be least likely to find an appreciative audience. Austerity, not opulence, was the new way. Donald Davie wrote, in the foreword to the 1992 edition of *Purity of Diction in English Verse*:

Recovering a wartime usage, I might say that these pages present poetry in an 'austerity package'. When every other commodity could be offered only under the acknowledged and over-riding necessity of Austerity (because of the successful U-boat onslaught on Allied shipping), the commodity called poetry had, simply as a matter of honour, to submit to the

¹⁰³ *New Lines: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Conquest (London: Macmillan, 1956), p. xii.

¹⁰⁴ Conquest, p. xii.

¹⁰⁵ A.T. Tolley, *The Poetry of the Forties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 31.

¹⁰⁶ Eric Homberger, *The Art of the Real: Poetry in England and America Since 1939* (London: Dent, 1977), p. 69.

¹⁰⁷ Homberger, pp. 69–70.

¹⁰⁸ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945–51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. vii.

same controls. When peacetime came, those wartime stringencies could not be set aside nor forgotten.¹⁰⁹

Davie's critical trope here is that the socio-political austerity of the immediate post-war years warranted, even required, a concomitant austerity in the poetic diction of the new poets.¹¹⁰ Though merely a trope, it has, for the most part, remained generally unchallenged in British poetry ever since – a governing of the tongue that stretches from Davie to the 'NextGen' Poets Simon Armitage, Glyn Maxwell and Don Paterson, as Stephen Burt has recently suggested.¹¹¹

A. Alvarez's position, advanced in his essay 'Beyond the Gentility Principle', first published in *Commentary* in 1961, a decade after Davie's book,¹¹² simply reverses the trope (without interrogating its inherent validity as a principle) – instead arguing that the historical urgency or anxiety of the atomic, post-concentration camp age requires a diction and syntax more urgent, more anxious and less controlled. This belief in the organic relationship between poetic diction and the state or zeitgeist or both is questionable. Does the age always deserve the image it demands?¹¹³

The main apparent faults with Forties poems from Davie's perspective are that they are: mandarin, rhetorical, wild, sentimental, romantic, ornamental and difficult – as such, they somehow fail to tell the truth, or represent the world (say in 1945 or 1955) as it really is. Instead, 1955 requires a poetic diction that is: authentic, ordered, undeceived, classical, crafted and lucid.

There are many reasons for the considerable downgrading of the Forties period in British poetry – but most of them are open to challenge. Consider the arguments that the period signally failed to produce a poet or group of poets with any direct influence on future directions in writing, and that, compared to the decades that sandwiched it on both sides, it was some kind of a damp squib.¹¹⁴ The poetry produced during the period tends to be classified as either 'war poetry' (in which case Douglas, Ross or Lewis are its chief practitioners) or sentimental/rhetorical and

¹⁰⁹ Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse and Articulate Energy*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006), pp. x–xi.

¹¹⁰ One could say that the mainstream poetic period since has been sixty years of poetic diction called to order – made to 'submit to controls' – made to consider stringencies.

¹¹¹ Stephen Burt, 'The Movement and the Mainstream', in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (see Milne above), pp. 32–50 (p. 47).

¹¹² A. Alvarez, *Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955–1967* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 34–44.

¹¹³ As Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' claimed.

¹¹⁴ Tolley, p. 13.

of little lasting value, being essentially against the grain of ‘English’ requirements – which are ‘puritanical’ but also ‘impeccable’.¹¹⁵

The periods immediately before and after this long decade – the Thirties and the Fifties – are, by contrast, apparently satisfactory, precisely for the reasons the Forties are not. The Thirties, of course, is home to a famous clutch of poets – MacNeice, Spender, Auden and Day Lewis and the Fifties (by 1954) had its own equivalent group of young bright graduates with a style to peddle in the poetic marketplace, the Movement.¹¹⁶

The style of the Thirties is often described as ironic, intelligent and politically engaged, ranging in reference from Freud, to Marx, Spain to Iceland – and the diction of the Fifties is apparently cynical, intelligent and politically disengaged. The key word seems to be ‘intelligent’. The chief fault of the Forties seemed to be that it was not intelligent at all: the heart ruled the head. And, according to J.D. Scott of the *Spectator*, people had become ‘bored by the despair of the Forties’.¹¹⁷

It is more complicated than that. Most of the central critical planks of the Movement platform were in place and in play during the 1940s (and well before Donald Davie’s *Purity of Diction* crystallized the mood) – for example, in John Lehmann’s reviews and editorial decisions, and in the Leavisite values of *Scrutiny* (which were quite unsympathetic to Dylan Thomas, even during his time of greatest popularity and influence).¹¹⁸ The idea that the Forties was some kind of sudden hotbed of uncontrolled linguistic exuberance, poetic rhetoric and sentimentality is debatable.

Despite the commonly held belief to the contrary, the Forties produced a respectable number of important (even canonical) collections, not least by the mid-century’s three dominant ‘English’ modernists, Auden, Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot. It also featured the emergence of a number of significant poets, such as Keith Douglas, Lynette Roberts, W.S. Graham and F.T. Prince.

Cape’s wartime series, *The Best Poems of* —, edited by Thomas Moulton, to take one anthology series at random, could publish *new poems* by, in just the period 1939–1943: Dylan Thomas, C. Day Lewis, Laurence Binyon, Keith Douglas,

¹¹⁵ Tolley, p. 26.

¹¹⁶ Adrian Caesar, in his book *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s*, has contested the dominant reading of the Thirties as much as I do that of the Forties.

¹¹⁷ Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 1–2.

¹¹⁸ Tolley, pp. 9–30.

Andrew Young, David Gascoyne, W.H. Auden, Ruth Pitter, Edmund Blunden, A.E. Housman, G.K. Chesterton, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Siegfried Sassoon, Walter de la Mare, Stephen Spender, Roy Fuller, Norman Nicholson, Edwin Muir, Laurie Lee, Dorothy L. Sayers, Frederic Prokosh, A.A. Milne, Louis MacNeice and Alun Lewis.¹¹⁹

Whatever else one might think of such a wonderful hodge-podge of a list – complete with writers now better known for their prose, and many hangers-on who are often consigned to the Georgian or Thirties period – it does not suggest the Forties was particularly bereft of good, solid, minor poets of the kind that each decade sees.

2. Dylan Thomas in the Forties and His Critics

Dylan Thomas has been defined as the quintessential Forties poet, though his work had already been widely published and celebrated in the Thirties. Associated, sometimes ambiguously, with the aims and manifestoes of several key movements of modernism, such as English surrealism, then the Apocalypse, or New Romanticism, his oeuvre has ultimately transcended, even as it remains somewhat hobbled by, those groupings and entanglements. Thomas is virtually unique among major British twentieth-century poets for remaining controversial more than fifty years after his death. The controversy circles around whether in fact he is a major poet. For example he is not included in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets* whose six twentieth century poets are Hardy, Yeats, Lawrence, Eliot, Auden and Larkin. Thomas, representative of the Forties Style, is skipped over, as if the narrative arc was simply Auden-Larkin.¹²⁰

Perhaps the best comparison would be with his friend, the poet Edith Sitwell, who never regained critical respect after being labelled as a self-promoting charlatan as Chris Baldick claims in his *The Modern Movement*.¹²¹ The difference with the Thomas legacy is that, unlike Sitwell's reputation, which is now nearly

¹¹⁹ *The Best Poems of the Year*, ed. by Thomas Moulton (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939–1942).

¹²⁰ Rawson.

¹²¹ Chris Baldick, *1910–1940: The Modern Movement*, *The Oxford English Literary History*, 13 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 101.

unsalvageable,¹²² his poetry is still intriguingly ambiguous – and this ambiguity lends to the age he represents its own flickering glamour and intrigue. That poetic language remains the main point of contention is both puzzling and also reassuring – for how else should poets be evaluated, than by how they deploy their language and style?

The broader critical case against Thomas has tended to be a moral or psychological one bolstered by a circumstantial mix of the banal and melodramatic, that often skirts the literary qualities of the poetry altogether. This could be described as the Leavisite tendency to ‘slip from the text to the man’. The Thomas rap sheet could read as follows: he was Welsh, started writing young, was not educated at either Oxford or Cambridge, read poems aloud in a sonorous voice, drank a lot, borrowed money, was a womaniser, became famous in America, and died under somewhat mysterious circumstances in a hotel in New York City.¹²³

After his death, it was not Thomas himself, but his spectre, the idea of Thomas, his reputation, which became a whipping boy, for a whole spectrum of writers who tended to do him down, loudly and often, in print and in public. Thomas comes to represent, I think, an idea of rhetoric personified – but worse than that, a Celtic rhetoric – which seemed to combine the verbal disorder and disease of romanticism with the worst excesses of sophistry – an oral running sore oozing bad poetry. Thomas, being ornamental, religious and emotive, was also, and apparently fraudulently, a sober craftsman – so that, what in other poets was admired, was in him seen as representing hucksterism.

Curiously, there is very little of Dylan Thomas on film (though he appeared on television in 1953). This does seem odd, as he was one of the first post-war poetry celebrities: even as radio was being surpassed by cinema and TV in America, and voice becoming less important than image. It is hard to imagine another opportunity for a poet to achieve such celebrity mainly on the back of sound recordings and public appearances at colleges and town halls.

Thomas seems to have had his poetry tainted by its successful contemporary reception, and provokes an anxiety of jealousy – as well as displeasure occasioned by poets who genuinely abhor the performance aspects of poetry (as Auden did). However, the work of Dylan Thomas also exemplifies the final stages of modernist

¹²² Richard Greene tries to salvage it in his new book, *Edith Sitwell: Avant-Garde Poet, English Genius* (London: Virago, 2011).

¹²³ As numerous biographies have shown.

lyricism – a stage where complex diction was mixed with religious and personal sentiment, and also impersonal statement.

Dylan Thomas had many critics who tried to wreck his posthumous reputation, but few as dedicated as Geoffrey Grigson, a self-described ‘Non-Dylanist’. Grigson, founder of *New Verse*, and a one-time acolyte of Auden, was liable to lash out, as late as 1982. In his volume of occasional essays and reviews, *Blessings, Kicks and Curses: A Critical Collection*, he both kicks and curses Dylan Thomas in a brief essay, ‘American and Welsh Dylanism: A Last Word from a Non-Dylanist’. He comments on how academics fond of Poe and Baudelaire have now discovered Thomas: ‘This time the bourgeois have turned round, and lighted a flame of sanctity from the dead poet’s alcoholic breath.’ Grigson refers to the fact that Thomas drank heavily. He asks, a little rhetorically, ‘Who cares if this poet sozzled, or made a public dive at parties for the more appetizingly outlined, if still virginal breasts?’¹²⁴

It is hard not to become polemical in the process of discussing such writing, but, it must be observed, as dryly as possible, that very much of the criticism against Thomas is polemical. Grigson offers a more literary opposition, which I shall quote in a moment, but I do want to observe, first, how intensely nationalistic anti-Thomas feelings can run, how much issues of Welshness and class seem to matter to some critics – to them, Thomas is no English gentleman:

Mr. John Ackerman, in his book on Dylan Thomas, the newest, doesn’t tell where he (Mr. Ackerman) is to be located: he signs his preface ‘Wales, 1963’, which is running up the Red Dragon on the doorstep. He says ‘a knowledge of the country and the culture which produced Dylan Thomas is fundamental to a full understanding of the poet.’ He doesn’t bother ostensibly about Dylan Thomas’s public legend (good); but having run up the flag, and sung ‘Men of Harlech’, he ties poet and poems to a Swansea childhood (new details about the school magazine), to the influence of Anglo-Welsh writers (including Margiad Evans) ‘who helped to create a national consciousness, the sense of a life being lived that was peculiar to Wales’, and (as if hoping to satisfy all Welsh parties) to ‘the tradition of culture existing in and through the Welsh language.’ [...] Mr. Ackerman (it doesn’t sound such a very Welsh name, Ackerman?) has to say that Dylan ‘is an ancient Welsh name found in the *Mabinogion*.’¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Geoffrey Grigson, *Blessings, Kicks and Curses: A Critical Collection* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982), p. 13.

¹²⁵ Grigson, p. 14.

Now, there are a number of things that can be said about this passage, including the observation that it seems hostile to any attempt to contextualise, culturally or historically, poetic texts, but there is a different sort of odour that emanates from the uncomfortable ‘it doesn’t sound such a very Welsh name, Ackerman?’ whose diction and syntax has a creepy affinity with Larkin’s ‘Jake Balokowsky’ figure in his satirical poem on American academics. For Grigson, Ackerman, with that foreign-sounding name, becomes a hypocritical ‘Other’, eager to play the Welsh card, but from somewhere else really, where people have names like that.

Grigson states the more academic poetic case against Dylan Thomas clearly when he notes ‘the stale sentimentalism of language’; ‘the literary stuffing, the echo of Keats, Francis Thompson, the Bible, Joyce, Hopkins, Owen, even Eliot’; ‘The properties – the worms, the mandrakes, the shrouds, the druids, the arks, the soul’; ‘The soft words canned (with canning’s horrible power to soften still more), and then scrambled, with a show of being original, into premoulded rhythms – the words (so unlike the vocabulary of Hopkins, whose idiosyncrasy Dylan Thomas so often borrowed and pulped) never tested against reference and usage, against the living body of English, and against the totality and resistance of things’.¹²⁶

Grigson has here dropped his sarcasm, and put into clear terms his problems with the style of the poetry of Dylan Thomas. In many instances, such criticism can easily be turned on itself, with a simple inversion. What is wrong with sentimentality (or sentiment)? Or, what is so rare about poetry full of allusion – especially to the Bible? Eliot is a master of such allusion. I am not sure what ‘pre-moulded rhythms are’ if not another way of saying a crafted use of metre, rhyme and form; and as for using words like ‘soul’ and ‘shroud’ – other than their slightly ecclesiastical trappings – surely they are available to poets? I think, ultimately, Grigson’s anti-Thomas case rests on that of empiricism, Locke’s arguments for plain speech and Pound’s for prose-hard diction: Dylan Thomas’s language is non-verifiable, having failed to test itself against ‘things’ – and the ‘living body’ (which has a religious subtext of its own) of English. This leaves us where we began.

There is something tautological about the critical claim that ‘all rhetorical poetry is bad because good poetry isn’t rhetorical’, and I am not sure the sort of case

¹²⁶ Grigson, p. 116.

that Grigson builds extends very far past such a rudimentary sort of evaluative process of circular logic, or taste.

Dylan Thomas was not a marginal figure or pariah, at the time of his death. There is a brief letter, in *London Magazine*'s reincarnated 1954 issue, which opens, 'Sir, the death of Dylan Thomas at the age of thirty-nine is an immeasurable loss to English letters. In memory of his poetic genius a fund has been started for the Establishment of a Trust to assist his widow in the support and education of his three young children.'¹²⁷ It is signed by thirteen hands, including T.S. Eliot, Peggy Ashcroft, Kenneth Clark, Graham Greene, Augustus John, Louis MacNeice, Edwin Muir, Edith Sitwell, and his close friend Vernon Watkins. Add to that William Empson's tireless support of Thomas, and this begins to sound like something of an establishment view.

And yet action was already underway, in *Scrutiny*, well before 1954, to undermine this 'genius'. It only grew, after his death. As G.S. Fraser puts it, '[...] Dylan Thomas's reputation as a poet has undoubtedly suffered at least a mild slump. He was always far too directly and massively an emotional poet, and in the detail of his language often too confusing and sometimes apparently confused a poet ...' for the newly-dominant critics of the *Scrutiny* school.¹²⁸

A more serious case against Thomas is made in Neil Corcoran's significant study, *English Poetry Since 1940*, as we shall see in a moment. Chapter 4, 'A New Romanticism: Apocalypse, Dylan Thomas, W.S. Graham, George Barker',¹²⁹ lays out the major problems with much of the Forties Style, as if published in *Scrutiny*, in 1952, and not, instead, more than forty years later, in 1993. It is surprising to read such dismissal of certain elements of diction, syntax (and subject), in a collection that otherwise covers a wide range of postmodernist or avant-garde tendencies (J.H. Prynne, for instance). Forties poetry does seem to upset the critical apple cart.

Corcoran begins by arguing that Dylan Thomas had his origins in an interest in surrealism (among other things) but, mainly, himself.¹³⁰ The problem is one of narcissism. 'His is a poetry much taken up with the fact of, and with the emotions attached to, certain forms of psychological regression.'¹³¹ This is a position originally

¹²⁷ *London Magazine*, February 1954, Correspondence, p. 79.

¹²⁸ G.S. Fraser, *Vision and Rhetoric: Studies in Modern Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 238.

¹²⁹ Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993).

¹³⁰ Corcoran, pp. 39–42.

¹³¹ Corcoran, p. 43.

advanced by David Holbrook in *Llareggub Revisited*, which claims there is a ‘persistent immaturity’ in the work and language of Thomas.¹³²

This narcissism is not considered a good thing for the poetry. ‘There are too many poems from the 1940s in which the nebulously vatic seems repellent in its myopic self-assurance or triumphalism.’¹³³ The poems are trouble, and cause trouble. ‘The trouble with numerous poems is that their glamour and charm cannot disguise the fact that they are elaborate tautologies.’¹³⁴

Apparently, the surface pleasures of a Dylan Thomas poem hide a troubling fact: poems are meant to be logical statements that must not contradict themselves (or else they become tautological). For Corcoran, a poem must be rigorously worked through, an equation that yields clear, new results. ‘The effect (of a Thomas poem) can seem like being insistently told, in some baffling way, some extremely simple things that we already know perfectly well [...]’¹³⁵ For Corcoran, then, it seems a poem cannot justify itself by being a sheer verbal pleasure alone – it must be an argument of logical clarity. This rational-empirical approach might suit a New Critical perspective, where form and content must work in tandem for a clear goal. But it is not the best sort of critical approach with which to appreciate the special qualities of Thomas.

For Corcoran, Dylan Thomas is a snake charmer, or charming snake, his poems wild: ‘with their libidinous dictions of friction and flow’ – ‘the body of the poem always turning back in on itself’ – and this self-sustaining interest in body, fluid and experience is deeply troubling to a critic who wants, ideally, the poet to turn their work ‘outwards to a recognisable external world of action, event, suffering and relationship’.¹³⁶ Linguistic, primitive energy, with its potential slippage, its force, might render the world ‘unrecognizable’ and therefore draw a veil over the rational order of things. Thomas is ‘Dionysian’ and therefore threatens a different order of things, one that wants its apples back in the cart – actually back on the garden’s tree.

Time and again, criticism and critique that appears elevated to higher concerns returns to disquietude with diction and syntax, never quite put into words, or often projected on to bigger thematic debates and quarrels. Corcoran admits to not

¹³² David Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1962), p. 185.

¹³³ Corcoran, p. 42.

¹³⁴ Corcoran, p. 44.

¹³⁵ Corcoran, pp. 44–45.

¹³⁶ Corcoran, pp. 44–45.

approving of the language of Thomas, the ‘ultimately wearying incantations and runes of the earlier work’¹³⁷ – as if he was some kind of witch doctor from a particularly offensive tribe. Or something someone puritanical cannot enjoy without vestigial guilt.

But not all Thomas is bad, apparently. His later work (from 1946 or so onwards) shows a marked improvement. ‘That these later poems invite the reader to ponder such issues of poetic tact, decorum and responsibility is a measure of their superior discrimination and scruple.’¹³⁸ It is interesting that Corcoran feels the later Thomas poetry is better. This is not the view of William Empson, who ‘liked the early obscure ones best’, and felt that the Dylan Thomas ‘style had become a mannerism’ by the time of ‘Altarwise by Owl-light’.¹³⁹ The point is, it is hardly a foregone conclusion that Thomas was necessarily developing into a better, more mature style.

Consider how many of these evaluative terms used to approve and affirm the ‘later Thomas’ (as most criticism does the ‘later Graham’) patronise aspects of style, in the earlier work, that constitute, in their own aesthetic systems, not simply immature mannerisms of a weak or diseased or primitive mind, but a *different kind of writing style*. I have italicised this last, because, strikingly, it often comes about, in these forms of criticism, that the main ‘problem’ (and a different style is always problematised, as if it were an invading disease) is that the writing is, as I said earlier, not identifiable with the dominant position.

Corcoran wants poems that are associated with *tact, decorum, responsibility, and scruple*. It is a biographical certainty that Dylan Thomas, the man, was not particularly responsible. This hedonistic free-falling lifestyle seems to have contributed to his becoming gravely ill in New York – but it is in no way sure that his poems would have greatly improved had they become increasingly scrupulous, even well-behaved, cleaned up and presented as a kind of Movement poetry, finally come into its own, at the end of the Fifties. Curiously, this moral-aesthetic shift happened, after a fashion, with the career of W.S. Graham. As Corcoran informs (using another hygiene trope): ‘W.S. Graham’s earlier work is helplessly parasitic on Thomas.’¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Corcoran, p. 47.

¹³⁸ Corcoran, p. 47.

¹³⁹ William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by John Haffenden (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), pp. 391–92.

¹⁴⁰ Corcoran, p. 47.

Critical writing on Graham seems to confirm this idea, positing a mythic arc for his writing, whereby the ‘early Graham’ is a deeply-flawed Forties poet, who, by 1955 (that time of transition to more lucid styles), with his long poem, *The Nightfishing*, begins his miraculous journey to redemption.

Graham’s career can be, conveniently, broken into an early and later period, and it is the case that his post-Forties poetry, now widely admired, is significant and delightful. However, too often, the admirable critical impulse, to celebrate and approve the later poems, comes at the expense of Forties poetry – indeed, the Forties Style becomes the Other, that must be somehow chastised, punished and denigrated, in some kind of primitive rite of passage, in order for the maturity of English poetry to be established, and a rightful order restored. In this liminal reading, Forties poetry is the savage child; and we are reminded again of how class and origin determines, in some criticism, and for some critics, how a poet shall be received.

Might we hold out hope of a different reading of the Forties, where it is not necessary to consider the qualities of the early Graham poems as something taboo, or badly wrong? Corcoran has this to say about the early Graham’s poetry:

It has the same incantatory rhythms; the same small field of reiterated, unspecific imagery of plant, season, sexuality and the ‘Celtic’; and the same melodramatic and portentous straining towards ‘vision’, towards some illuminative or revelatory ecstasy. Collisions of apparent accident and spontaneity tenuously negotiated into coherence by a fraught will to closure, these poems seem as a result not only derivative but unreadably and earnestly verbose, a prime case of that fevered neo-Romanticism whose combating gave an initial impetus and rationale to the 1950s Movement.¹⁴¹

Continuing the trope of invasive disease (popular with wartime propaganda fixated on the enemy and hygiene) that runs throughout Corcoran’s chapter on the 1940s, Graham’s early writing (and by extension all Forties poetry of this kind, deriving from the Dylan Thomas style) is figured as a rampant disease, which has caused a fever – a verbal fever than can only be combated, and hence cured, by the triumphant arrival of liberating forces, the Movement.

It is odd to see this urge to purify, to cleanse the diction, articulated so vehemently in the 1990s. The language is similar to the introduction in the *New Lines* anthology of 1956, edited by Robert Conquest, which introduced the

¹⁴¹ Corcoran, p. 47.

‘Movement’ poets – dismissing the younger poets of the 1940s as representing ‘the sort of corruption that has affected the general attitude to poetry in the last decade’.

Corcoran is not alone in diagnosing the writing of the period as some kind of gross physical ailment, a bodily disturbance. Michael Schmidt, in his *Reading Modern Poetry*, refers to ‘the 1940s twitch one associates with Dylan Thomas, Nicholas Moore, and the early W.S. Graham [...]’.¹⁴²

Robin Mayhead, writing a review for *Scrutiny* of Thomas’s *Collected Poems, 1934–1952*, in 1952, is alert to the pagan forces at work. Thomas has ‘exuberant verbal energies’ that have led to ‘something of a cult’ – as if he were, instead, a foreign idol, and not a Welsh boy made good. Finally, he concludes that ‘the attitudes implicit in the widespread acceptance of Mr. Thomas as a major poet [...] may well strike one as potentially disastrous for the future of English poetry’.¹⁴³ Those pestilent attitudes have, over the past sixty years or so, been mainly eradicated. English poetry was saved.

To see how, one may turn to Andrew Motion’s study, *Philip Larkin*, published in 1982. Motion’s introductory chapter¹⁴⁴ provides a significant trope that this chapter has been tracking – that of foreign poetry as disease or illness. Motion first brings it up when quoting Larkin, who claimed that after his ‘Celtic fever’ (the period when the Irish poet Yeats influenced his early work of the 1940s) had abated, he was now a patient ‘sleeping soundly’.¹⁴⁵

Motion keeps the metaphor running, as he explores how he sees the relationship between ‘two traditions – native English and modernist’ that collide in the first sixty years of the twentieth century in English poetry. Motion writes that Larkin ‘has done more than any other living poet to solve the crisis that beset British poetry after the modernists had entered its bloodstream’.¹⁴⁶

This is an important sentence, not least because, as can be seen by reading the whole of the chapter, it is based on an argument for an ‘English line’ of ‘intensely patriotic poets’ who use a ‘moderate tone of voice’ that exhibits ‘an unmistakably

¹⁴² Michael Schmidt, *Reading Modern Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 69.

¹⁴³ Robin Mayhead, ‘Dylan Thomas’, *A Selection from Scrutiny*, ed. by F.R. Leavis, 2 vols, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 125–30.

¹⁴⁴ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 11–21.

¹⁴⁵ As the critic Ronan McDonald recently reminded me, in conversation, this idea of the tensions between the Celt and the Anglo-Saxon derive much of their force from Matthew Arnold’s writing on the subject.

¹⁴⁶ Motion, p. 20.

English tone of voice’ and – for the Movement writers – a ‘traditionally English stance’, to defend ‘the interrupted English tradition’.¹⁴⁷

Motion argues that Larkin, able to withstand and absorb trace amounts of foreign modernist and symbolist elements (the ‘crisis’) in his poetry, is able to inoculate himself, and by extension, an entire English bloodstream, from the more destructive aspects of the disease that had entered it.

Arguably, there is no one clear ‘English tradition’ – but several – and there has never been a time in ‘English’ poetry when there have not been influences from abroad – and in all instances these influences, whether repelled or accepted, have enriched British poetry. Owen Barfield writes: ‘A certain foreign element, impinging on the native genius, has, in point of fact, played a fairly prominent part in the history of English poetry.’¹⁴⁸ One thinks of all the English poets who based their work on classical sources – not least Shakespeare; of Wyatt using the Petrarchan sonnet; of Milton, influenced by Italian poets; of Coleridge studying German romanticism; Symons,¹⁴⁹ deeply influenced by the French tradition, and contemporary poets influenced by O’Hara and Stevens.¹⁵⁰

3. Critical Responses to 1940s Poetry

Ian Hamilton, in his essay ‘The Forties’, writes: ‘the now notorious forties, has been thoroughly written off in most contemporary pigeon-holings. It has popularly become the decade dominated by the punch-drunk Apocalypse, the foaming horsemen, and – as John Wain has diagnosed it – by a wartime hysteria which could only have produced such rubbish.’¹⁵¹ He then goes on to quote Wain, who found

¹⁴⁷ Motion, p. 20.

¹⁴⁸ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, 2nd edn (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), p. 172.

¹⁴⁹ The key thing to think of here is the critical reception of F.T. Prince. If the development of British poetry 1900–1960 is seen as a line interrupted, circa 1910, and then recommenced, circa 1950, what is posited is an interregnum period of roughly forty years, crowned by the Forties, which is increasingly ‘infected’ with influences and styles that do not properly represent the ‘English voice’. A poet like Prince is interested in foreign styles and models, particularly the Italian, French and American, and writes in a ‘tone’ that is not, really, moderate. Therefore, for poet-critics eager to see the English line reinstalled, and the foreign fever with its high styles downgraded, Prince becomes a part of the problem.

¹⁵⁰ It is one of the odder aspects of the rear-guard action against British modernism that modern poetry’s chief fault is taken to be its un-Englishness.

¹⁵¹ Ian Hamilton, *A Poetry Chronicle: Essays and Reviews* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 55.

much of the Forties poetry ‘impossibly overblown, exaggerated, strained, rhetorical’.¹⁵²

Hamilton *does* think there is some good (mainly wartime) Forties poetry, and that F.T. Prince might be one of the better poets of the time, although he also thinks he suffers occasionally from a ‘grandiose-rhetorical impulse’ – especially in ‘Soldiers Bathing’.¹⁵³ My thesis differs from Hamilton (at least) by not seeing such grandiose, rhetorical impulses as being such a bad thing; not that an arch-minimalist such as Hamilton (whose own poems have themselves become a stray style) would have been likely to appreciate the grand gesture.

Recent anthologies of the last decade or so (for example, *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945*, edited by Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford) pay short shrift to any post-war Forties poems or poets, neo-Romantic or otherwise, other than George Barker, Dylan Thomas and W.S. Graham (and they have fourteen pages among them). Lynette Roberts and F.T Prince are not included – omission or inoculation?

The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945 has an introduction subtitled ‘The Democratic Voice’. Choosing to elide the complex interrelations between the end of World War II and the Cold War realities that emerged almost immediately, the editors state that ‘World War II marks a fissure in history and poetry in Britain as well as Ireland.’¹⁵⁴ They neglect Tony Judt’s argument that 1945 is not as clean a break as has been claimed.¹⁵⁵ In a paragraph, the Forties is mainly highlighted as being where Auden became American, Eliot became truly English (with ‘the highwater mark of modernist poetry in Britain’ *Four Quartets*) and English poetry found its own (Northern and regional) champion in Basil Bunting.

The period, lost in a fissure, is then caricatured, rather easily: ‘The short-lived, strained and clotted New Apocalyptic movement of the 1940s was sloughed off like a skin. The democratic voice was arriving.’¹⁵⁶ Once again, the skin rash that was the less austere variant of poetry, as experienced in the Forties (albeit the

¹⁵² Hamilton, p. 55.

¹⁵³ Hamilton, p. 72.

¹⁵⁴ *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945*, ed. by Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford (London: Viking, 1998), pp. xix–xxxii.

¹⁵⁵ Nigel Alderman and C.D. Blanton, ‘Introduction’, in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (see Milne above), pp. 1–10 (p. 3).

¹⁵⁶ Armitage and Crawford, p. xx.

Apocalyptic variety), is diagnosed rapidly, and then scrubbed away. The snake has shed its skin.

Now there is a new problem with it though; somehow, it was not 'democratic': a new voice was arriving (one ushered in by the Butler Education Act of 1944). This confuses facts on the ground, but paves the way for the arrival of post-colonial, Irish, Northern and other working class figures, born between 1939 and 1963 or so, who bring to the poetry table their 'voices' that speak a language people want to hear. It is perhaps an inconvenient truth that Dylan Thomas, George Barker, and other Forties poets were hardly university-educated toffs themselves, and in many instances were widely popular and democratic in their writing. Some of the 'clotted' cream rises?

Graham rises, in estimation, in Sean O'Brien's anthology, *The Fire Box: Poetry in Britain and Ireland After 1945*. Graham is described as a 'major' poet, in the introduction, and is included though Dylan Thomas is not.¹⁵⁷ Nor are Roberts or Prince, again. It is unclear why Thomas, who had very good work published in 1946, and who died in the Fifties, is excluded; his name is not mentioned, either, in the introduction, though we are told that 'the Movement also saw itself in reaction against the poetic excesses of the 1940s, exemplified by the hysterical irrationalism of the New Apocalypse School'.¹⁵⁸ Exemplified also by the New Romantic movement, which included Kathleen Raine, Graham, Thomas, Barker and other poets not quite 'hysterical'.

O'Brien writes of 'the Second World War, when large political gestures and the exploitation of emotive language had been put in the service of barbarism'.¹⁵⁹ Maybe so, though the speeches of Churchill might be considered an example of wartime oratory at its finest, and the actions of the soldiers so inspired were not uniformly barbaric. This suspicion of high rhetoric operates from the time of Davie, through Alvarez, to the present. A purifying fire is called upon to bring its own austere comforts. The madness is over, the enemy (foreign, surrealist, strange) has been defeated, the invasion repelled. The twitch is cured.

It seems to me that there is another way to read the work of Dylan Thomas – one that allows its great verbal pleasures and music to continue to be of relevance. In

¹⁵⁷ Sean O'Brien, *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland After 1945* (London: Picador, 1998), pp. xxv–xxxviii.

¹⁵⁸ O'Brien, p. xxx.

¹⁵⁹ O'Brien, p. xxx.

Empson's reading of Dylan Thomas, the main aspect of a Thomas poem is not the 'meaning' per se (his poems are difficult for some critics to parse precisely because they do not have meanings in the usual sense), though they have 'magnificent meanings'¹⁶⁰ but in 'the extreme beauty of sound'. The general argument of all Dylan Thomas poems, for Empson, which can be applied as a template to reading and enjoying them, is 'the idea any man can become Christ, who is a universal',¹⁶¹ since 'events in Dylan Thomas's body are related pantheistically to more massive ones outside'.¹⁶²

According to Empson, the Dylan Thomas style was not monolithic, but developed over time in its influences, from Donne to Shakespeare,¹⁶³ and he was 'coming to write more directly and intelligibly – not, I think, better [...].'¹⁶⁴ Empson observed that the style he had made his own was 'not part of T.S. Eliot's "tradition"', which is intriguing.¹⁶⁵ I should like to reiterate my point that clear-cut histories of poetic lineage in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties are very complicated; not least because the usual claim that the Movement is (at least partly) based on Empson's poetics seems to entirely avoid his long-running support of Dylan Thomas.

For Thomas, the poem is performative of a style itself – in this case, a style that emphasises the continuity between rhetoric, verbal complexity, paradox, the surreal, religious and emotive statement and the poet's own body. Empson's position suggests that a Dylan Thomas poem is a deliberate microcosm. I might say the poems are homunculi. Much like in Hobbes, where state and body are elided, the passions and pains of his unique but not original sins and experiences perform themselves out into the poetic texts.

Given that Thomas was a canny, hard-working craftsman and editor, fully aware of the modernist debates in poetry, and by no means a religious zealot, this pantheistic link, fully formed, between poem and body, between self and text, cannot be simply a visionary leap; rather, it suggests that his verbally rich poems were modernist objects, ironic artifacts. Operating within his works is what I call 'emotional irony' – which, as we shall see in the chapter on Prince, is the fusion of

¹⁶⁰ Empson, p. 405.

¹⁶¹ Empson, p. 397.

¹⁶² Empson, p. 385.

¹⁶³ Empson, p. 388.

¹⁶⁴ Empson, p. 410.

¹⁶⁵ Empson, p. 405.

neo-Romantic and modernist modes of style. The poem/poet is both sincere *and* artificial.

Within the last decade, books by or edited by Chris Wigginton and John Goodby, and articles by them as well as Edward Larrissy, have begun to emphasise the complexity of Thomas's poetic achievement, as a modernist and figure of contemporary relevance – no longer a mere bogeyman or whipping boy. Larissy explicitly links the poetry of Empson and Thomas, as in both cases their styles abound in artifice and rhetoricity. Empson's poetry 'offers an appropriate and absorbing intensity of artifice',¹⁶⁶ what he reminds us W.S. Graham called 'the rich clutter of language' in the poems of Dylan Thomas.¹⁶⁷

Thomas has begun to be appreciated by a younger generation of critics, who recognise the continuities in his work with the avant-garde, and language-centered theorists such as Foucault and Derrida. Such critics celebrate the 'monstrousness' of Thomas, the 'clowning' and 'excess' of his linguistic performances, his sense of 'display', and, finally, the poetics that underscores all his work – that is, Dylan Thomas is not an orally fixated country bumpkin, but a Modernist no less than Joyce was, implicated in the full deployment of language to generate complex linguistic artifacts; but also, in the ironic slippage of his effects and style, one where everything was thrown in. As such, we reach a curious paradox: Dylan Thomas is potentially as much the source of the language poetics of Charles Bernstein, say, as Veronica Forrest-Thomson is. The Dylan Thomas period, then, remains a source of lively poetic invention, not a verbal dead end after an unrepeatable tour de force.

¹⁶⁶ Edward Larrissy, 'Languages of Modernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (see Olsen, above), pp. 131–44 (p. 137).

¹⁶⁷ Larrissy, p. 140.

CHAPTER 4:

F.T. PRINCE'S OVERLOOKED LUSTRE OF LANGUAGE

Do not forget the poor old man

– F.T. Prince, 'The Old Age of Michelangelo'

F.T. Prince, as we have seen in earlier chapters, is one of the poets regularly omitted from the mainstream canon, despite various critical attempts to correct this situation. In this chapter I discuss the early poetic work of Prince, published between 1938 and 1954, during which time he was between the ages of twenty-six and forty-two; in short, the poems of his young manhood until he reached midlife and mid-career.

1.

Who was F.T. Prince? If one reads the leading obituaries for Prince published in Britain and America in 2003, a picture emerges of a respected, serious, contented, and curiously neglected figure. Despite the many interesting, even exciting things, he did or wrote, the picture does not quite add up. I therefore want to pay closer attention to a few of those obituary notices, and see how a reading of Prince and his stylishness can emerge.

Frank Templeton Prince was born in South Africa, in 1912, of a Jewish father from London's East End, and a Presbyterian mother; he moved to England to be educated at Oxford; then studied at Princeton; was involved during World War II in Intelligence; became eminent as a professor of literature (he was invited to give the Clark Lectures for 1972); was married with two children, and a practising Catholic. Prince died on 7 August 2003, at the age of 90. Prince once wrote, considering the life of the poet:

Perhaps in reaction against early travels from South Africa, to Europe and the United States, and the Middle East during the war, I have lived in the same English town for the last twenty-five years. A poet does not need to live a special kind of life. In my experience an ordinary life, with marriage, children, friends, and work, is special enough. There is no

difficulty in being both a scholar and a poet, except that you have to work twice as hard as other people.¹⁶⁸

Perhaps the special, even striking, event of his life, at least as a poet, was Prince's initial mentoring by T.S. Eliot, and then Eliot's rejection of his work, in the early 1950s (which was a setback to his publishing career):

After his 1938 Faber volume and six years' army service in the Intelligence Corps, in Bletchley and Cairo, Prince did not publish another volume until 1954; then, having been dropped by T.S. Eliot, he went 'out of sheer perversity' (in his own words) to the egregious R.A. Caton at the Fortune Press, who brought out the eponymous volume *Soldiers Bathing*.¹⁶⁹

What is intriguing in this excerpt (aside from the elements of espionage and code-breaking implied) is that Prince and Philip Larkin, in 1954, basically execute a poetic changing of the guard – Prince demoted to the small Fortune Press (Larkin's press for the 1945 *North Ship*) just as Larkin is about to publish *The Less Deceived* with the Marvell Press (a small press also, but a collection whose trajectory was unstoppably upwards from here on).

The Independent – as if sensing that his work is best placed in a period now essentially finished – claims Prince as a major World War II poet: 'Non-professional readers of poetry know one poem which is in every anthology of 20th-century British poetry, "Soldiers Bathing", and which, along with Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts", is undoubtedly the most famous English-language poem of the Second World War.'¹⁷⁰ As we will see, even this poem has become rather neglected of late.

Anthony Rudolf, author of the obituary, goes on to set out the broad outline by which Prince's work is sometimes considered (dropped by Faber, and then oddly marginalised at the peak of his career): 'In 1970 Prince's involvement with small presses began. It is surely emblematic of one aspect of our literary culture – the marginalisation of most non-populist poetry – that, from then on, such an important

¹⁶⁸ Frontispiece of *John Heath-Stubbs, F.T. Prince, Stephen Spender, Penguin Modern Poets 20* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972).

¹⁶⁹ Anthony Rudolf, 'Professor F.T. Prince', *The Independent*, Obituaries, 8 August 2003, <<http://independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/professor-f-t-prince-548554.html>> [accessed 15 July 2011] (para. 5 of 20).

¹⁷⁰ Rudolf, para. 4 of 20. With time, however, even this one poem has become less and less anthologised.

and truly significant poet's books have been published outside the commercial mainstream.¹⁷¹ Rudolf identifies the stylistic aspect of his work that appeals to the New York School, even while offering quotes by Prince to show he was more bemused than anything by this attention.¹⁷² *The Guardian* offers a similar narrative of early success, then downfall, then later surprising rediscovery:

Initially championed by TS Eliot, Prince's first collection was published by Faber in 1938. Lyrical in feeling, embracing poetry for poetry's sake, it showed the influence of French modernists such as Mallarmé, a flavour that was later to have its effect on the innovators of the New York school, a group of writers that flourished in the 1960s, the most famous poet among them being John Ashbery. Earlier, as the war against Hitler had gathered momentum, Prince's writing had fallen out of fashion. Poets like Auden and MacNeice were favoured, their work demonstrating a commitment to social concerns. Increasingly neglected here, Prince's poetry remained aloof from workaday moralising. It displayed a maverick tendency – concerned, in particular, with itself. But it was this quality that garnered the admiration of the New York school, and led to Prince receiving the EM Forster award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1982. Even today, his poetry is more widely read in the US than it is in Britain.¹⁷³

Here, we are offered other clues to how Prince's poetic stylistic signature has often been read – the lyricism, the 'influence of French modernists', and its aesthetic aspect being 'concerned, in particular, with itself'. These remarks could almost be plucked off the rack for Wallace Stevens.

The Times offers, again, a slightly different slant on things (one begins to think of Charles Foster Kane's story unfolding), but which continues to establish a general picture; what is varied is the emphasis, not the facts themselves:

He was uninterested in the left-wing poetry of the Thirties, and the major influences on his early poetry were Yeats, Eliot and Pound. The shorter lyrics in *Poems* (1938) sometimes betrayed too strong an echo of Yeats's rhetoric but in longer poems such as 'Words from Edmund Burke' and 'The Tears of a Muse in America' his mature style was already present. Prince used long free-verse lines with complex syntax and remarkable musical variety in

¹⁷¹ Rudolf, para. 9 of 20.

¹⁷² Anthony Rudolf, 'I Have Written Other Poems You Know', *P.N. Review*, 29 (September–October 2002), 26–28 (p. 28).

¹⁷³ Anthony Howell, 'FT Prince: A Poet Famed of Lyrical Imagines of Soldiers Bathing', *The Guardian*, Obituaries, 8 August 2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2003/aug/08/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries>> [accessed 15 July 2011] (paras 6–8 of 12).

monologues which could evoke historical subjects while remaining intensely personal. [...] Published at the time of the Munich crisis, *Poems* was probably too delicate and intellectually demanding a work to gain immediate attention, although ‘Chaka’ — a sequence about the Zulu leader — and the shorter lyrics ‘The Babiaantje’ and ‘The Moonflower’ assured South African interest in his work.¹⁷⁴

Here is the first mention of ‘rhetoric’. Also, there is reference to Prince’s syntax and use of the long free verse line – and, that sometimes neglected aspect of his work, South African history. The *Times* obituarist also offers this way of thinking of his later appeal: ‘younger British poets saw him as a figure, like Basil Bunting, who represented continuity with the high modernism of the 1920s’.¹⁷⁵ This is an intriguing claim, as these ‘younger British poets’ were few and far between, it seems to me.

The New York Times, which might have been expected to have more to say about The New York School, actually has less. It does, though, mention a late-career evaluation from Donald Davie:

Reviewing his book *Collected Poems* (1979) in *The New York Times Book Review*, a fellow poet, Donald Davie, wrote: ‘Setting aside Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’, F. T. Prince’s ‘Soldiers Bathing’ is perhaps the finest poem in English to come out of World War II; and this is widely acknowledged. Why has he never since done anything so good?’¹⁷⁶

To my mind, not that, but another overriding question might be: why didn’t Eliot publish the ‘high modernist’, often religious and cultured *Soldiers Bathing*? It seems hard to imagine a collection – on the face of it – more likely to appeal to Eliot’s taste – unless that taste had changed considerably since the composition of *Four Quartets*. Or, it may be that Prince’s radical shift in poetics, a return towards a Miltonic tendency (a modern baroque tendency, one might say), was unappealing to Eliot’s

¹⁷⁴ ‘F.T. Prince’, *The Times*, Obituaries, 8 August 2003, <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/obituaries/article2088227.ece>> [accessed 15 July 2011] (paras 7–9 of 18).

¹⁷⁵ *Times*, Obituaries, para. 13 of 18.

¹⁷⁶ Eric Pace, ‘F.T. Prince, 90, Poet Inspired by War, Dies’, *New York Times*, 10 August 2003, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/10/nyregion/f-t-prince-90-poet-inspired-by-war-dies.html>> [accessed 15 July 2011] (para. 7 of 15).

taste (though he did later, in 'Milton II' offer a qualified revision of his notorious anti-Miltonic views).¹⁷⁷

The moment that Eliot rejected Prince's book is the moment that an alternative British modernism was born, since the decision splits off, from its main body, a key disciple of the high rhetorical style of American high modernism, as practised by Crane, Stevens (and Eliot, in *Four Quartets*) – and therefore requires the later intervention of younger postmodern American poets enchanted by French-influenced lyrical abstraction into debates about twentieth century British poetry and canonicity. Few more puzzling, or subtly obscure, literary shifts can be so described.

2.

The 'struggle' between modes of poetry, at this period, is the subject of several competing master narratives; it might be wise to render problematical these stories of aesthetic battle, since they are often presented as rather simplistic us-and-them clashes that avoid the more awkward issues that arise when one begins to recognise complexity.

One of the poet-critics to think anew about the Forties is Andrew Duncan, whose earlier work, such as the study *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, is radically aligned with the poets of the British poetry revival (among other things, he identifies, and abhors, 'anti-rhetorical Saxon glumness').¹⁷⁸ Duncan has recently written about the Forties 'oratorical poets': 'Poets such as Terence Tiller, Alan Ross, and F.T. Prince stand as representatives of the positive potential of British poetry in the 1950s, while the living death of The Movement was occupying the public sphere.'¹⁷⁹ It might be that Duncan overstates, if only slightly, the vampiric tendencies of the Larkin brigade.

Duncan goes on to observe that: 'They [Tiller, Ross, Prince] also represent the potentiality of a manner which has not abandoned syntax and verse movement, or the lyrical speaking subject; a humanism surviving amid alienation and shock effects.'

¹⁷⁷ The sort of return that Owen Barfield argues, in *Poetic Diction*, while archaic, may also be to an older style closer to the 'young' origins of poetry. See Barfield, p. 163.

¹⁷⁸ Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003), p. 274.

¹⁷⁹ Andrew Duncan, *Origins of the Underground: British Poetry Between Apocryphon and Incident Light 1933–79* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008), p. 15.

They seem to have largely been written out of the record.’ Indeed, they have been. Duncan’s identification of these writers as the oratorical poets, with their retention of the lyrical speaking subject (emphasis on the lyric as much as the speaking), is another way of emphasising their appreciation of emotive rhetoric, that is, the sentimental classicism, the merging of the romantic and classical streams that is the hallmark of this Forties Style.

In conversation with the poets and critics Peter Porter and Anthony Thwaite,¹⁸⁰ in which I was able to ask them questions about F.T. Prince, a portrait of the poet emerged. To these two poets, he was the author mainly of ‘Soldiers Bathing’. Bewilderingly, Prince had been adopted by ‘the Anglo-American avant-garde’ as ‘one of their own’. According to Porter, ‘there is nothing like the scent of neglect to arouse the avant-garde’. At the same event, I was able to ask poet-editor Robert Crawford about the absence of Prince from the post-war anthology he had co-edited with Simon Armitage, which encompasses the period of Prince’s major work.¹⁸¹ Crawford mentioned ‘Soldier’s Bathing’ – and described it as being ‘good in places’ but tending to go on ‘too long’,¹⁸² which is rather a revealing statement, in that it does tend to confirm the suspicion that Prince’s style does not appeal to those who expect their poems tightly packed in terms of that organic union of form and content discussed earlier; instead, Prince’s text is able to linger, meander, express and extol excess – its errancy is in fact its delighting in pleasing extension – an Eros of lengthy matter. Then, in conversation with Fiona Sampson, poet, critic and editor of *Poetry Review*,¹⁸³ I asked why she had not included work by Prince in her anthology of the best of a hundred years of the *Poetry Review*. She told me that she had considered it, but felt that Prince was not ‘central to the story’ of British poetry.

These are surely indicative symptoms of a neglect that may also be a condition. Poetry canons get shaped by such small gestures of taste and decision (or indecision).¹⁸⁴ There remain stories about British poetry, and Prince is one of them. His story is the story of the poet who is not quite part of the story, but, rather than

¹⁸⁰ This conversation took place at the 2008 TS Eliot Poetry Awards, London, England.

¹⁸¹ Armitage and Crawford include a few Forties poets such as Kathleen Raine, George Barker, Dylan Thomas and W.S. Graham. Sean O’Brien, who also leaves out Prince in his *Firebox* anthology, only includes Graham among the Forties poets.

¹⁸² Larkin included ‘Soldiers Bathing’ in his controversial *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, where it takes up a little less than two pages. It is not very long.

¹⁸³ In 2009, at Kingston University.

¹⁸⁴ For a good study of the shaping of poetry canons, see Golding’s *Outlaw to Classic*.

being allowed to sink completely below the waves, gets ‘rescued’ somehow, by a new, and different, set of poetic lifeguards – in this instance, the so-called ‘Anglo-American avant-garde’.

What I think we can say at this point is that F.T. Prince was the master of a poetic style that became unfashionable among certain literary arbiters, for reasons that now appear vague and unpersuasive, and have little to do with the literary quality of the poetry; indeed, it is one of the leitmotifs of this thesis that, far oftener than may be comfortably admitted, lazy assumptions and hand-me-down aesthetic judgements allow many poets and texts to go seriously unread, often owing to the unexamined prejudices of opinion and cant. There is no reason for Prince to be a ‘one poem poet’ any more than Henry Reed is, except the reason of the anthologist (not enough space). But critical reading and academic consideration, let alone posterity’s value judgements, should have no such page limitations, since what is at stake is not republication, but revaluation. Prince is the author of many poems as good as his most famous work; their lack of readership reflects poorly on the absent readers.

In the winter 2008 issue of *Poetry Review* John Ashbery (in conversation with poet-critic Ben Hickman) has this to say about F.T. Prince: ‘Prince was one of the first modern poets I read; another contemporary of his, Nicholas Moore was also one of my favourite poets, and I can’t understand why they’ve been overlooked. Prince’s early poetry is very unconventional although it doesn’t offer much difficulty. There’s a kind of lustre on his language which intrigues me.’¹⁸⁵

This is not the only time that Ashbery has written of Prince, and followers of Ashbery tend to have at least a glancing acquaintance with his work. In 2004, Ashbery wrote, for a collection morosely titled *Dark Horses: Poets on Lost Poems*, a brief essay on the early Prince poem ‘The Moonflower’, which begins with what may be the definitive sentence on the poet: ‘F.T. Prince is a poet who deserves to be better known.’¹⁸⁶

On the one hand, there is Peter Porter, who cannot fathom why anyone would bother to pluck Prince back from the brink of oblivion (or rather *can* fathom – it is

¹⁸⁵ Ben Hickman, ‘Out of the Ferment: Interview, John Ashbery’, *Poetry Review* (2008), 80–85 (p. 82).

¹⁸⁶ John Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Eugene Richie (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p. 304.

the exciting musk of avant-garde recovery) and on the other, we have Ashbery, who cannot comprehend why anyone would forget him in the first place.

As Mark Ford writes of Prince's debut collection, *Poems*:

Its various styles seem to have developed in total isolation from each other, and to pull in completely different directions: it establishes no unifying set of concerns, and no readily identifiable poetic persona. Each poem appears wholly self-contained, as if answerable only to itself. [...] Prince's voice continually eludes definition [...] he seems altogether incapable of either self-display or large-scale cultural generalisation.¹⁸⁷

Ford here identifies one of the central difficulties that critics have had with certain Forties poets, such as Prince and Moore – their lack of a personal voice. As we have seen earlier, this has long been a need for many readers of poetry, and we only have to consider Lowell's quote on Larkin, included on the inner cover of some versions of *The Less Deceived*, to note the emphasis placed on 'personal voice'. Prince offers no such comfort, instead, a poetry of various styles, disunity of subject, and uncertain persona. His style is no style, one might say.

I am not sure that such a stylistic mode is 'incapable of self-display' – it may be a sign of simply a far more subtle, complex and advanced form of performance, a series of poetic games on a different playing field altogether. Prince's *Poems* sounds not unlike Corbiere's *Les Amours jaunes*, as it is described by Katherine Lunn-Rockcliffe, as a paradoxical work, heteroclit in style, lacking an aesthetic manifesto, and inscrutable.¹⁸⁸ Of course, Prince is very different from Corbiere, but both seem to share what Lunn-Rockcliffe terms a "voice-defying lyricism" – and this would certainly extend to Moore, whose combination of the lyric and comic explored through various madcap personae is far more pronounced. Such a style is actually extremely aware of its self-performing qualities, and though not self-referential in any banal way, still revealing.

If Prince is the master of a style of styles, without an identity, how is it that those admirers who enjoy his work know it when they come across a Prince poem – or rather, enjoy a sense of continuity between the texts. After all, their appreciation is for the oeuvre as a whole, and a style that arises, however fragmentedly, from that

¹⁸⁷ Mark Ford, *A Driftwood Altar: Essays and Reviews* (London: The Waywiser Press, 2005), pp. 219–220.

¹⁸⁸ Katherine Lunn-Rockcliffe, *Tristan Corbière and the Poetics of Irony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 11.

ambiguous eclectic gathering of texts. In a sense, is not the Collected Prince both a cypher and symbol, for the general undecidability of all Forties poets? Is not the Forties Style precisely a style that has no personal voice, in favour of the expressive freedom such a state allows?

The January/February 1992 issue of the *P.N. Review* has an interview with Prince, conducted by Anthony Howell. In reply to the question, ‘Which other American poets have influenced you?’ Prince says: ‘I think Whitman is the greatest poet of all. I can’t respond to many of the others, though I have a great admiration for Frost. I can’t share the English admiration for Lowell. Pound was one of my masters.’¹⁸⁹

Prince’s own erotic, sensuous poetry seems to come into a different relief when put alongside that of Walt Whitman’s. Note the absence of an admiration for Lowell. This seems a little perplexing – given that Lowell, like Prince, is the Forties and Fifties author of often ornamental, high modernist, overwrought poetry with a Christian, even Catholic, theme, such as *Lord Weary’s Castle*. Perhaps Prince is balking at the English admiration of Lowell, especially that of Alvarez. Perhaps Prince is thinking of the later Lowell, known more for his confessional work, and certainly *Life Studies* was the antithesis of what Prince was after in his own less-demotic and less-egoistic writing. After all, Prince seems to have often followed through on Eliot’s dictum of effacement of the personal in his work (though, as with Eliot’s own poetry, this tendency in Prince has probably been overstated).

Contra the Movement ideal of an ‘English voice’ expressing English values, Prince was deeply interested in poetry as a space to vocalise various characters and viewpoints not his own, and not English (he being, at any rate, South African and Catholic). Time and again in the Prince interview, the poet wishes to spell out his debt to high modernism – indeed, his place in it. Prince meant himself to be a modern poet, but was most enjoyed by ‘postmodern’ poets – poets who often had little or no time for Eliot and Pound. It is perhaps the supreme irony of his place in the modernist period – a place that is the liminal stage precisely where modernism begins to end, and postmodernism begins to begin – that makes Prince a poet of period style disjunction.

¹⁸⁹ Anthony Howell, ‘F.T. Prince in Conversation’, *P.N. Review*, 18 (January/February 1992), 42–46 (p. 45).

How does one reconcile Whitman and Pound? Pound asked that question himself.¹⁹⁰ Prince goes further in his exchange with his poetic forbears in fusing the visionary father and prodigal son of American modernism – without ever becoming in the process either entirely American or modern – or (to paraphrase Larkin) – entirely un-American or un-modern. This was a truly mid-century mid-Atlantic style that, perhaps, only someone not originally from the cosmopolitan literary centre of London could develop.

3.

There are few studies of Prince's poetry, in either extended or shorter form: Donald Davie's discussion of Prince's syntax in *Articulate Energy*; the essay by Mark Ford collected in *A Driftwood Altar*; the thesis by Alka Nigam, *F.T. Prince: A Study of his Poetry*; the eightieth birthday articles in the *P.N. Review* (which includes John Ashbery's and Geoffrey Hill's essays) arranged by Anthony Rudolf; and, finally, Peter Robinson's review of Prince's *Collected Poems*, also from the *P.N. Review*. There are also shorter considerations of Prince's writing, in books by Press, Tolley, and Duncan.

Given the relative neglect that has befallen Prince's oeuvre – especially compared to the claims made for its importance by his few advocates – these critical interventions, often no more than appreciations, represent – more or less – the only official or scholarly reception of the poems, and take on more weight than a clutch of such texts might otherwise do (one could hardly suggest, for instance, that Eliot's work could be summarised in a handful of studies). What emerges, are, I think, two things worth noting: 1) on some aspects of Prince, most everyone agrees; and, conversely, 2) even among his interested readers, on some aspects of Prince's writing there is far less, perhaps no, consensus.

This has had a slightly perverse effect, since the consensus has tended to clot around the moribund subject of Prince's status and its lack, whereas the lack of consensus circles about the actual nature of how best to actually convey what it is about his poetry that deserves, even demands, greater attention.

¹⁹⁰ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems*, ed. by T. S. Eliot, 2nd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1948; repr. 1968), p. 97.

There has been no sustained full-length study of Prince for over thirty years, since the work by Alka Nigam (now a professor of literature in India), completed in 1978 at Salzburg University for her PhD and published in 1983.¹⁹¹ Nigam's work has two advantages – it begins with a curious note by Prince himself, and is a labour of deep respect and admiration. Nigam's *F.T. Prince: A Study of His Poetry* opens with a brief and somewhat dandyish foreword, by Prince, which seems designed to cement his reputation for being a well-travelled aesthete;¹⁹² it could almost be described as arch; one suspects it of containing veiled nods and winks, or at least a few coded messages. He commences with the following exquisitely decadent statement, where poetry is figured as cooking, or making up (usually feminised social activities):

A poet knows more about his own work than any reader can, but his knowledge is not of a kind to give him unique authority in interpreting it, and still less in judging it. It is a knowledge of the *cuisine* or *toilette*: Mallarmé spoke of the *prodigieuse toilette* which had resulted in the final version of *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* or *Herodiade*.¹⁹³

Prince then goes on to offer 'an image such as might occur in a dream, or a folk-tale, or a surrealist film, for the poet's experience of passing from one phase of his writing to another' (though oddly he neglects to add that such an image might also occur, of course, in a poem):

¹⁹¹ Professor Nigam emailed me an unpublished summary in booklet form of her thesis intended for the Writers and their Work Series in London, in PDF format. This fifty-page document is heavily annotated by F.T. Prince who offered to make corrections for her. Alka Nigam, 'Poetic Art of F.T. Prince' (unpublished draft article, Banaras Hindu University, [1983?]). This manuscript is a treasure trove of fascinating annotation and insights into Prince's critical perspective on his own work. It would be a thesis in itself to explore all the implications of this document. In reply to the sentence 'He has the scholarship of Pound, form and artistry of Eliot, and range, variety and humanity of Yeats' he has, modestly, and perhaps sensibly, written 'overstatement – omit'. He has changed 'Prince's spiritual kinship with Shelley and Plato' to 'psychological kinship' – no doubt because Shelley was an atheist, and Plato before Christ; Prince's spiritual kinships would be different, more Catholic. But, note, he still accepts kinship with these political figures – each with very different perspectives on the role of the poet in the polis. Prince has crossed out 'as an unsophisticated young boy' from the sentence 'When Prince came to Oxford in 1931' Later, perhaps aware of the homosexual interest in his work, he crossed out the word 'lover' and substituted 'woman'. Finally for our current purposes, consider this fascinating edit: 'Prince's longer poems in general, and his later poems in particular, have a perfect clarity of the theme.' Theme has been changed to 'expression'. Prince, it seems, recognised in his work clarity of expression.

¹⁹² Not least because it is signed 'F.T. Prince, Sana'a University, Yemen Arab Republic'.

¹⁹³ Alka Nigam, *F.T. Prince: A Study of His Poetry* (Salzburg: Institut Fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universitat Salzburg, 1983) p. i.

He is on a staircase which rises out of darkness and climbs into another darkness. He stands on a step, which is the manner, the technique and vision of the poetry he has just produced. Out of this step the next step must rise, before he can go further. It has to grow or solidify, and may keep him waiting, meditating, despairing, praying or muttering spells, before it offers itself. Then, as (if he is lucky) he moves up to the new step, the step he has left melts or falls away into the darkness. He cannot go back, and if he has not been able to go on, he must freeze into immobility and silence.¹⁹⁴

This is an odd text that brings to mind Yeats's 'The Winding Stair', and Gnostic and neo-Platonic symbols of ascension. It explicitly presents an image of poetic ascension, or apprenticeship – a journey of supplication and terror, rich with occult implications and fraught with ultimate peril. Poetry is one step at a time. Usefully, for our purposes (studying his poems) Prince mentions the trinity of poetic elements he thinks make up that step: manner, technique, and vision. Manner is Eliotic; technique is Poundian; and vision is Yeatsian. Tellingly, 'manner' (that is, style) comes first of the three, next technique, and only last 'vision' (corresponding, one assumes, to some sort of insight, wisdom, or truth).

Nigam has noted how 'in many of Prince's poems, the central character's power of action is very limited. He is unable to alter the situation he finds himself in.'¹⁹⁵ This certainly appears to be true of his depiction, here, of the poet's vocation. This is quite a passive role imagined for the poet, based on pleading and luck (one thinks of 'An Epistle to a Patron', which is filled with an apparently submissive courtier's requests). I am struck by two particular details that seem wilfully bleak – that when one steps up, the earlier step falls away ('one cannot go back') and that after stepping forward, one may not be able to ascend further, either, resulting in silence and immobility.

This dreamlike tale represents the latter stages of the poetic process as excessively, even tragicomically punitive. Even a brief analysis yields the following questions for a Prince poetic: why can't a poet return to earlier styles? And, given they may not, at some point, be able to improve their writing, why would this result in becoming frigid and mute? It is obvious, is it not, that an immediate, if equally futile alternative suggests itself? The poet might leap into the darkness, kicking and screaming. I suspect Prince of being melodramatic here. In the fourth and final

¹⁹⁴ Nigam, p. i.

¹⁹⁵ Nigam, p. 143.

paragraph of the foreword, after all, he reminds us that poems ‘do not necessarily vanish’, but instead at best ‘have a life of their own’. He concludes:

And if what they disclose to the poet himself in later years is not always to his liking, he can still be pleased to find that they [the poems] are shaped, completed objects, and that the poem as an art-object can somehow capture and retain, and still release, its little charge of life, like a musical-box or a drawing or a sculptor’s *mobile* [his italics].¹⁹⁶

Again, Prince offers us his ideal touchstones for what can ‘please’ in a poem – highly aesthetic one and all: 1) that they are shaped, completed objects; and 2) that this art-object can capture, retain and release a little charge of life; and, 3) exquisitely, these little poems shall not be in any way seen to be grand projects (such as, for instance, *Paradise Lost*, *Leaves of Grass*, or even *Four Quartets*) but rather, whimsical, even charmingly trite things, close to bric-a-brac, or kitsch – an artist’s cartoon, a music-box, or a mobile.¹⁹⁷ For Prince, it seems the struggle is all, the gift modest. It almost reminds one of Decadents who attended Mass without any hope of Heaven – since they believed only in the ritual, not in the redemption. Mark Ford has observed that Prince’s work is the antithesis of Pound’s ‘logopeia’ meant to purge poetry of the archaic and make it new. ‘Prince’s poetry seems inspired by its [logopeia’s] antithesis, its complete absorption in the language of the poem he is at this moment writing.’¹⁹⁸

This might sound like a Danto post-historical style of all styles, but, according to Ford, it is not postmodern: ‘Prince, unusually for his era, seems to me a poet both supremely conscious of the conventions within which he presents a given poem as operating, and determined never to mock or undermine those conventions through irony.’¹⁹⁹ This is an intriguing suggestion, one I only partly accept. Prince’s work seems to me to be supremely ironic, though in a way that is also aware of sentiment and authenticity.

Still, it does remind us of one of the key elements of Prince’s style, which is perhaps so original – the sometimes surface sincerity of the work – which is, in fact, part of its rhetorical design. Sincerity and artifice had been combined before, in

¹⁹⁶ Nigam, p. ii.

¹⁹⁷ Though it is worth noting that Eliot’s own output was relatively slim until *Four Quartets*, his final major work of poetry.

¹⁹⁸ Ford, p. 221.

¹⁹⁹ Ford, p. 221.

Prince's modernist precursors, though one thinks of the unsettling shifts in Corbière and Laforgue,²⁰⁰ and in early Eliot. Marjorie Perloff tends to downplay Eliot's immediate debt to Laforgue and Corbière, and highlight the radical break his early poems, such as 'Prufrock' made with the Edwardian and nineteenth-century traditions. As she writes in her chapter on Eliot in *21st Century Modernism: The New Poetics*: 'These delicate adjustments are not ones that Eliot could have derived from Laforgue, if for no other reason than that French prosody, dependent as it is on quantity rather than stress, cannot produce such marked shifts in intensity and pitch.'²⁰¹

F.T. Prince observed, in *The Italian Element*,²⁰² that critics need to make allowances for the differences of languages. Relating Milton to Tasso he suggests: 'If English allowed less freedom than either [Latin and Italian], for that very reason a slighter degree of distortion would avail to produce an equivalent effect of strangeness.' By bringing the (it may be) subtler nuances of the Corbière-Laforgue manner into English, Eliot selected, perhaps heightened, certain effects, as English permitted, but cannot therefore be assumed to have authored a radical break, or invented a new style; he simply introduced the new style into English, with the implications that has.

This debate has implications for poets like Prince, who can be labelled far less 'avant-garde' or 'innovative' than they are, if critics expect, and even require, that poets generate entirely new modes, manners or styles, rather than borrow, refine and translate them from different languages and literary traditions, as, indeed, Prince mainly did. My point here is that both Eliot and Prince may have been most radical in their refinement, not in their invention.

Ford notes how Prince's first two collections employ styles that 'deliberately echo the cadences of the Victorian dramatic monologue as developed by Tennyson and Browning' – and this is, to my mind, more or less the style of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Ford emphasizes the way in which, like Auden, Prince is good at using 'earlier poetic styles'. This using of 'earlier poetic styles' is precisely the

²⁰⁰ See Lunn-Rockliffe, *Tristan Corbière and the Poetics of Irony* and Anne Holmes, *Jules Laforgue and Poetic Innovation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

²⁰¹ Perloff, p. 20.

²⁰² F.T. Prince, *The Italian Element in Milton's Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 24.

permission I found in his work to encourage my own deployment of such earlier poetic styles in my own writing.²⁰³

4.

Prince's canon of achieved poems is not large. Apart from 'The Moonflower' – which, as we have seen, is a favourite of Ashbery's – there are perhaps two dozen poems of note. If one lists the poems selected for the 1972 *Penguin Modern Poets 20* paperback (which also includes John Heath-Stubbs and Stephen Spender), one already has a good idea of what was thought, then, to be his post-war achievement: 'An Epistle to a Patron'; 'To a Man on His Horse'; 'The Tears of a Muse in America'; 'The Token'; 'Soldiers Bathing'; 'The Inn'; 'The Question'; and 'The Old Age of Michelangelo'. These poems are all drawn from his first two collections, the Faber, and Fortune Press books, *Poems*, 1938 and *Soldiers Bathing*, 1954. His later work is also of interest, especially the long poems *Memoirs in Oxford*, and *Drypoints of the Hasidim*, but is mainly beyond the scope of this study.

In 1979, Anvil Press published Prince's *Collected Poems* (Carcenet produced a more definitive version later), a one hundred and ninety-four page collection. The poems that correspond to Prince's published poetry of the Thirties, Forties and early Fifties, and which Prince, in his 'Prefatory Note' claims he, in some cases, 'resisted the temptation to suppress', run from the sections 'Early Poems' to 'Soldiers Bathing' (pages 13 to 79).²⁰⁴ In my view, it is these sixty-six pages of poetry that constitute the work that makes Prince one of the most important poets of this period.

Prince's style can be described as an 'anthology style' – on the surface eclectic and open to many various manners, techniques and traditions, the virtuosity and eclecticism operating as a sort of palimpsest of available poetic strategies. Prince, having developed his reading interests during a colonial, South African childhood, had only poetry books to guide him, and an unlimited sense of equality among them; his formative years having been non-judgemental and Catholic in taste, his style was always broad and open.

²⁰³ Ford, p. 220.

²⁰⁴ F.T. Prince, *Collected Poems* (London: Anvil Press Poetry and The Menard Press, 1979), p. 9.

This may be so, but, in practice, certain aspects of Prince's work appear shaped mostly by three or so modes or traditions: 1) the Italian Renaissance/Miltonic (rhetorical-classical); 2) the Whitman-Crane (democratic-romantic); and 3) the metaphysical/modern, by way of Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Stevens (the classical-rhetorical, inversion intended). To suggest that a fusion of these influences is possible might at first seem unlikely, but we know that Prince did it – or at any rate, his texts are evidence of such a complex poetic web.

Eliot and the modern poets tended to downplay the value of Milton, precisely because, in the words of C.H. Sisson, 'in this period [1900–1925] poetry was corrected and improved by canons of prose'.²⁰⁵ By the Forties, Sisson observes, 'the dog returns to his vomit' as 'Lord Chesterfield's lesson in poetics' creeps back. Since one of the values of the modern period was a demand for a clean, hard, prosaic emphasis, Milton's interest in Latinate mannerism could not but go against the grain, though a select few critics, notably C.S. Lewis, defended the Miltonic style then.²⁰⁶

Frank Kermode's study of the continuities between Romantic, symbolist, and modernist poets and poetics (mainly in terms of the idea of the isolation of the artist-poet, and their access, via the image, to some privileged truth), *Romantic Image*, concludes with several pages hopefully arguing for 'Milton's restoration' – despite the 'ghastly rhetoric' – since, despite 'Verlaine's remark' (against rhetoric), 'He too has his rhetoric, and as long as there is verbal communication, there will be rhetorics; they are the means to order, and without that no lamp burns in the tower, no dancer spins.'²⁰⁷

Kermode's study is in part a plea to recognise the poetic value of discourse, and discursive poetry – which often leads to longer poems not modelled on musical forms – despite a hundred and fifty year (now two hundred) prejudice, in some circles, for a briefer, intense poetry of 'things, not ideas'. It hardly seems it could be a total coincidence that Prince's major study of Milton (not explicitly mentioned by Kermode) had appeared the year before the writing of his work (in the summer of 1955). Kermode does mention the 'baroque of Tasso' – a key aspect of Prince's study, however.²⁰⁸ A renewal of interest in Milton was in the air.

²⁰⁵ C.H. Sisson, *English Poetry 1900–1950: An Assessment* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 263–64.

²⁰⁶ C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960; repr. 1967), pp. 52–61.

²⁰⁷ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 196–97.

²⁰⁸ Kermode, p. 75.

Charles Altieri has identified the turn from rhetoric and the Romantic ‘baggage of lyric self-promotion’ as a main aspect of the dialectical development in modern American poetry, with a subsequent ‘return to rhetoric’ with Stevens and Auden.²⁰⁹ For Prince, as with Yeats, the excess and eloquence of the rhetorical traditions seems never to have entirely gone away; nor was the inherent dandyism, even decadence, of Eliot’s early poetry, ever entirely obscured by his later works (which, in the 1940s, became increasingly rhetorical, if not ever fully New Romantic).²¹⁰ Recently, Chris Baldick and Robert Scholes have written of how the so-called ‘modernist period’ was far more heterodox than previously claimed, open to many and various writerly strategies and options.²¹¹ Baldick writes: ‘Although it now dominates our map of the literary scene in these decades, modernism was in its own time a minority current.’²¹² He goes on:

The critical priorities of ‘modernism’ in some accounts of this period’s literature have encouraged a general assumption that English poetry underwent a profound revolution between about 1910 and the mid-Twenties. Such assumptions, though, mistake revolutionary intentions for revolutionary results, confusing innovation and iconoclasm, for which there is patchy evidence, with an actual overturning of centuries-old traditions in verse, for which there is none. They also tend to rely upon a further conflation of the interconnected but still distinct tradition of American verse, which had indeed been more radically experimental, with that of verse in Britain and Ireland, which more readily obeyed the gravitational pull of tradition.²¹³

To my mind, the problematic word in this section is the ‘in’ in the phrase ‘verse in Britain and Ireland’, for there was a point, it seems evident, when many of the most radically experimental of the American poets were, indeed, *in* Britain and Ireland. The revisionist tendency of this passage, which is meant as a corrective to the sort of emphasis that Altieri and Perloff tend to make (that the interesting thing about modernist poetry was its break with the past), can result in the undermining of the sort of style and, indeed, the very period that Prince is a representative of.

²⁰⁹ Altieri, pp. 126–36.

²¹⁰ As Kermode wryly observes – “‘Movements’ are never as new as they look: it is one of the duller laws of literary history”, pp. 127–128.

²¹¹ Robert Scholes’ book, the *Paradoxy of Modernism*, is based on this very premise.

²¹² Baldick, p. 3.

²¹³ Baldick, p. 75.

If one attempts to defuse an interest in poetic modernism as a revolutionary or evolutionary development of styles and modes, and also uncouple the trans-Atlantic link between American and ‘English’ poetry of the period – one is liable to miss the possibility that the period 1940–1954 is not *after* the end of modernism, but is instead the last, late stage, before, in fact, North American and British/Irish poets do separate, more or less, with the advent of the ‘anthology wars’ of the 1950s.

At any rate, Baldick offers a useful contemporary definition of the ‘modernity of modern English verse’ that somewhat situates the influences and elements that Prince would have been aware of and, indeed, immersed in:

The modernity of modern English verse, then, is not a matter of any revolution in techniques and forms, although certain modest technical innovations did play their part in breaking old habits. The modern element resides rather in an extended range of diction and of ‘unpoetical’ subject matter, in a deliberate avoidance of ‘Victorian’ moralizing and ornate poeticism, and in less tangible qualities such as tone, attitude, mood, and authorial ‘voice’.²¹⁴

I am not sure that this ‘modern element’ was all that English, or all that modern, since ‘unpoetical’ subject matter had been introduced by Wordsworth and Coleridge, far earlier, into English poetry, and of course by the un-English Baudelaire, Swinburne, and then the Decadents later. But it seems safe to agree that the diction of the modern period was more complex, and of a different kind.

The poet that F.T. Prince is in some ways closest to, though a poet he rarely explicitly mentions, is the American Hart Crane. Like Crane’s, his poetry was an attempt to fuse the traditions and implications of competing, and even opposed poetic masters, Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot. Crane was possibly more immediately able to identify with the American homosexual, and, troubled by the European Eliot’s *Waste Land*, to create his *The Bridge*. In almost mirror opposite fashion, Prince seems to have identified closely with the aims of Eliot’s stylish and cosmopolitan aims – perhaps as best exemplified in his dandyish early work (such as ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’), and he also accepted Eliot’s aim to be impersonal in poetry – while meanwhile deeply embracing the manner, themes and often style of the author of *Leaves of Grass*.

²¹⁴ Baldick, p. 79.

The intriguing paradox of the modernist style that Prince was able to achieve by thinking and writing through his own Milton-Whitman-Eliot blend, is that he writes impersonal poems out of the Whitman manner – a manner ferociously egocentric (though claiming to be ultimately egoless). I base my claim of a Whitman influence not only on Prince's own admission but on any number of poems, lines, phrases, and moments, from *Leaves of Grass*, and, especially, the longer sequences of poems such as 'Song of Myself', which directly relate themselves to questions of the body and gender, desire, the soul, the beauty of animals, and the rejection of a static moral value system (of good or evil) – Whitman's pantheistic grandiosity.

Prince's ability to develop a style, or set of styles, that was so modern, and yet clearly rhetorical and deeply self-reflexive, a mode of writing that has 'postmodern' elements, is supported by his research into Milton's style, and its Italian basis. I would like to argue that F.T. Prince did for the postmodern poetry to come (that is, Ashbery) what Eliot did for the modern, in his essays and reviews on the metaphysical poets, and other poets of earlier periods – that is, returned the sense of present poetic possibility to an awareness of a hitherto neglected stream.²¹⁵

Prince could hardly follow Eliot by researching the same poets, or same Elizabethan tradition, invested as he was in the Miltonic – a dramatic intervention at the time. In his book, *The Italian Element in Milton's Verse*, first published in 1954, the same year as *Soldiers Bathing*, Prince attempted to realign the modern English poetic tradition somewhat away from The Metaphysicals, though still within the Renaissance. Pound, of course, by this stage, had written much in and about Italy, and Eliot had been affected by Virgil and Dante – however, I would argue, their main foreign influences, explicit and implicit, had been French (they rejected, for the main, the German romantic tradition).²¹⁶

The year 1954 (not 1939, or 1945, or 1950) must surely mark the beginning of the end of the great modern period(s) – if only for the fact that Prince's work (unlike Eliot's poetic-critical interventions of thirty years before) went – generally speaking – so unappreciated at this time. Instead of the double-whammy of a brilliant

²¹⁵ I am seeking to attempt the same feat myself, by showing how, in some ways, the apparently moribund period of the Forties still has a few 'tricks' left to teach us.

²¹⁶ Pound had the troubadours, Eliot had Corbière and Laforgue, and, along with Yeats, they all had the *Symbolistes* (if only by way of Symons); and, if only for Eliot, the conservative French Catholic thought of the time was deeply attractive (Pound admired, for his part, the Italian fascists, it is true).

critical work, along with a major poetry collection, heralding the rise of a serious and major new poet, the work was, as we have seen, side-lined.

5.

As has been claimed, no other poet of the 1938–1954 period has a diction and syntax, a style, quite like that of F.T. Prince, but that's not to say there aren't 'family resemblances' with others. The mode that he works in has something of the dandyish manner of the early Wallace Stevens of *Harmonium*. Other elements combine to generate a particularly opulent, ornamental, and definitely rich poetry, including erotic imagery underlying references to aesthetic theory and Renaissance art. What cannot be in doubt is Prince's thinking through of the implications of style for a poet, in such a way as to put him very much in the tradition extending from Wilde, to Eliot, to Stevens. However, we must look further back still.

For our purposes, the key aspect of Prince's study, *The Italian Element in Milton's Verse*, is that it offers us Prince's poetic theory of style in which: 1) artifice and sentimentality can be interfused creatively (and beautifully), in a complex rhetorical strategy; 2) archaism, older poetic traditions (some assumed to be dead or moribund) and foreign influences and languages (chiefly Latin and Italian) can be shown to have had a positive effect when brought over into English poetry (Milton); and 3) a consideration of the Renaissance models for engaging with themes of love and God are fruitfully developed.

It is hardly surprising, then, to discover, in Prince's own poems, a unique blend of artifice, sentiment, archaism and modernity, often mannered, literary and engaged with Eros and divinity. Prince's own poetry was profoundly inflected by his scholarship. In his poem 'An Epistle to a Patron', an artist (or artisan) of many and various skills and abilities seeks to curry favour and power from 'My lord', in a long poem of ninety long lines – lines that peter out at the end, losing their lustre and their rhetorical force (the last lines are: 'I have simply hope, and I submit me / To your judgement which will be just').²¹⁷ The supplicant, 'hearing lately of your opulence in

²¹⁷ Prince, p. 16.

promises',²¹⁸ is drawn to offer to build weapons of war, and then increasingly bizarre, or at least sensuous, favours:

[...] I live by effects of light, I live
To catch it, to break it, as an orator plays off
Against each other and his theme his casual gems, and so with light,²¹⁹

The offer to catch and break light is connected to the admittedly servile desire to experience the full range of the 'tyrant's' resources, which he wishes made available to him in order to transform them. In a striking moment, he says 'I must / Attend your orgies and debates (let others apply for austerities), admit me / To your witty table, stuff me with urban levities, feed me, bind me / To a prudish luxury'.²²⁰

Given how 'austerity' became a key critical trope of the period, as well as a genuinely felt experience, it is worth noting how Prince turns austerity, as a concept, on its head, contra Davie. Here, 'austerities' are what one applies for – and orgies and debate (sexuality and rhetoric) are the luxuries he craves, to feed his art.

Prince's *ars poetica* is one that eschews austerity and celebrates an opulent diction, one capable of containing ornate, rare and even rather purple particulars. In 'To a Man on His Horse', a sonnet, the speaker in the poem observes a rider on an Arab stallion, and openly envies the rider the experience.²²¹ Desiring to serve the exquisite form of the beast, once again a master-servant dialectic is proposed, one that seems to find creative outlet in servility and adoration to a thing of rare physical beauty.

Prince writes of the stallion that 'He sheds a silvery mane, he shapes / His thin nostril like a fop's'.²²² The horse is personified as precisely the sort of stylishly dressed, fawning courtier that the poet's own manner most resembles – the diction at one with the desire to recognise the horse's mastery. All this dandyish, equestrian interest comes to a head in the final three lines, which explicitly display an arrangement (if not derangement) of the senses that can only be described as erotic, in a wonderfully tumescent excess of sentiment and style:

²¹⁸ Prince, p. 13.

²¹⁹ Prince, p. 14.

²²⁰ Prince, p. 14.

²²¹ Prince, p. 17.

²²² Prince, p. 17.

I have wished to become his groom,
And so his smouldering body comb
In a simple and indecorous sweetness.²²³

This desire to observe, and then serve, perfected male beauty, in terms of art, and then beyond the frame of art, is an active presence in many of Prince's most affecting poems. It is apt, here, to consider how the act of attending to the object of his desire, the stallion, and combing the 'smouldering' body, breaks the need for an ornamental (let alone orientalist) high style, as the sweetness of corporeal union with the animal (and with animal nature itself, in his own experience of it as well) can be 'simple and indecorous' – the paradox of the diction being that these three sensual closing lines are rather more decorous than austere.

Prince's best-known, best-loved and most widely anthologised poem, is 'Soldiers Bathing', very much mined from the Whitman-Eliot seam (with the balance turned to Whitman). The poem establishes its central concerns around a band of naked male soldiers bathing in the Mediterranean, closely observed by their commanding officer, who looks on them and then, comparing them to a Michelangelo cartoon, reflects on love, war, theology, the nature of good and evil, terminating in a metaphysical description of the evening sky.²²⁴

The key tropes and figures of the poem, then, are either very much derived from Whitman (soldiers being observed, the beauty of the naked male body, good and evil) or Eliot's 'Prufrock' (Michelangelo, discussions of art, sea imagery and, ultimately, a shocking comparison of the evening sky to a body).

The compelling and unique style²²⁵ of the poem arises, I believe, very much from this successful fusion of apparently antagonistic poetic mentors and texts – the way in which deep sincerity and objectivity, emotionality (even religiosity) and irony – are conjoined. This, and not the cruder stereotype of 'the Forties poems', seems to be the rare combinational blend of the period – the ability to work with emotional, sometimes religious diction and ironically formal (distancing) complexities. As with Dylan Thomas, this creates a kind of 'emotional irony' in the work, or an irony of emotionality, if you will.

²²³ Prince, p. 17.

²²⁴ F.T. Prince, *Soldiers Bathing and Other Poems* (London: Fortune Press, 1954), pp. 7–8.

²²⁵ One that I have tried to emulate in some of my poems presented here.

What Beach has written of Hart Crane is equally applicable to Prince: ‘Crane’s development as a poet owed a good deal to the work of first-generation modernists such as Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and W.B. Yeats, under whose collective shadow he began his career.’ Beach observes that Crane was obsessed with ‘Prufrock’, as we must infer was Prince. Crane, Beach goes on to note, read widely in Whitman, the aforementioned modernists, Shakespeare and the French symbolists – all Prince’s influences as well.²²⁶

This so-called ‘eclectic mixture’ has been explained by David Perkins as being derived from a non-European reading perspective, which often got its poems from anthologies. Perkins observes that isolated poetic figures, in their youth, often had no actual contemporaries, but instead the company of the dead but living poetic influences in the books they pored over. Anthology reading ‘[...] promoted a readiness to try the styles and effects found in Milton or Keats, with results that were sometimes disastrous and sometimes boldly splendid’.²²⁷

This ‘anthology style’ is especially apt for the dilettantish Prince, a sickly and privileged youth, who grew up on a far-flung farm in South Africa, surrounded by few friends and many books. What I wish to make clear here is a paradox – that Prince is the other to Crane textually and verbally just as he is so similar. When Beach writes of Crane’s ‘almost grandiose exuberance of language’, ‘astonishing array of literary styles’ and ‘elevated rhetoric’ – he could be writing about Prince; however, Crane’s ‘arcane vocabulary’, ‘intensely personal and highly metaphorical style’ and ‘alogical language of packed associations’ are the inverse of Prince’s.²²⁸ It is almost as if Crane represents what becomes the two main sides of the British Forties Style – what I would like to call the Prince and Dylan Thomas styles – in one. For, it is Dylan Thomas who generates his own style of lyric modernism, employing precisely that mix of arcane words, personal myth and packed associations that so troubled critics like Bayley.²²⁹

Prince – and this is where his style becomes so odd – is also modernist and lyrical, but rather than personal is impersonal, and, rather than opaque is sometimes crystalline. And yet, also elevated and rhetorical, he is profoundly aesthetic. In

²²⁶ Beach, p. 61.

²²⁷ David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1976), p. 87.

²²⁸ Beach, pp. 66–67.

²²⁹ Bayley, *The Romantic Survival*, pp. 193–96.

poems like ‘Soldiers Bathing’, Prince sought to balance the generous scope of Whitman with a more conservative, but never oppressive, Catholic faith (one that was always kept in abeyance, hovering over the poems). It is this religious amorality, as much as anything, I suspect, which appeals to Ashbery, and generates the lustre of the language.

Whitman, in ‘Song of Myself’, provides numerous moments that later infuse Prince’s poetics and imaginary: ‘Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore’; ‘I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul’; ‘Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent’; ‘You light surfaces only, I force surfaces and depths also’; ‘Very well then I contradict myself’ – which build to explaining the shockingly beautiful and rather unexpected end of the poem:

I feel a strange delight that fills me full,
Strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful,
And kiss the wound in thought, while in the west
I watch a streak of red that might have issued from Christ’s breast.²³⁰

This Yeatsian ‘strange delight’ (one recalls the Irish airman and his ‘lonely impulse of delight’) becomes ‘strange gratitude’, a strange repetition and difference, especially given that this shift in strangeness is compared to the possibility (‘as if’) of ‘evil itself’ (as opposed to merely something evil) being beautiful; and here an erotic figure is created, at once of an *homme fatal* (a beautiful evil), and yet an incorporeal substance (the mind, not the body, the ‘wound in thought’): a disturbing eliding movement from evil, to beauty, to kissing a wound (and one cannot help but think of the idea of the female sex as sometimes described as the male sex wounded here). This wound (not in the west) is then transferred to another evil, visited upon a divine body (the famous wound in Christ’s side) – here blood from Christ’s ‘breast’ – which, again, sexualises and even feminises Christ’s crucifixion, given the earlier ‘kiss’ – and one recalls Christ as ‘bride’. Here is Prince’s chief expression of his sensuous gratitude for being allowed to glory in the world of bodies: as man, as soldier, art-lover, religious thinker and, Whitmanesque poet.

²³⁰ Prince, *Soldiers Bathing*, pp. 7–8.

CHAPTER FIVE:

TERENCE TILLER'S LOVELY SHAPES OF RHETORIC

In the following two chapters I will discuss two Forties poets whose work has become increasingly marginalised and who both, in different ways, represent what in retrospect looks like a last gasp of late high modernism. Terence Tiller was interested in lyric modernism, and his poems are, at times, a hybrid of Yeats, Eliot and Auden, a challenging rhetorical feat to pull off; but their style, saturated in the 'exoticism' of wartime Egypt, resonates now, with only a gentle misreading, as being glamorously appealing. Nicholas Moore sought to find a hybrid alliance between the dandyish Francophilia of Wallace Stevens in America, and a more British sense of irony, by way of the Apocalypse, which he was associated with. Both poets enjoyed a sense of the artifice of the poetic text – privileging style over an authentic speech utterance – which has cost them their audience in later decades.

There is something exotic, dangerous and glamorous about the ambience and setting of the film *Casablanca* that is of the essence of the wartime Forties experience and that has remained attractive to audiences (and readers) since then, albeit from a nostalgic (and at times camp) perspective.

Terence Tiller's poems, often explorations of love and desire set in Egypt during World War II, are almost the poetic equivalent of the Bogart-Bergman film. Tiller, who is more or less a forgotten figure now (his work is out of print and there are no major critical studies of his writing), published three volumes with the New Hogarth Library in the Forties. *Poems* was the first of these, from 1941; his second was *The Inward Animal*, from 1943. His Third, *Unarm, Eros*, from 1947, completes a trilogy of wartime poetry arguably unequalled for its extravagant lyric modernism.

One of the few contemporary critics to write on Tiller is Andrew Duncan, who emphasises the sensitivity and sensuousness of mid-century poetry, especially Tiller's. Tiller 'seems to have devoted much time to writing poetry which was sexy

and romantic'.²³¹ Duncan also notes his importance for future poetry: 'surely he points ahead to a whole strand of 1960s poetry which was reflexive and self-critical and preferred the fine to the gross'. Tiller also anticipates 'the concern with light' that 'appears in poets like David Chaloner and Denise Riley'.²³²

Tiller, like Keith Douglas, insofar as he brought the twin tensions of mortal combat and Eros together – though with a far less murderous precision – might be said to be an influence on Thom Gunn, whose early Cambridge poetry also explored, fruitfully, images of men at arms and love. This is a Renaissance trope, originally – one thinks of Fulke Greville's poems, such as 'Sonnet 78', with its Machiavellian and martial imagery. As we saw with F.T. Prince, a key resource for one strain of the Forties Style was the Renaissance, with its heightened manner.

This is Tiller, but could be Gunn: 'All night they have been wounded on each other, / the waves that fall like armour from their poise' – not least because the tropes are ones we think of as quintessentially Gunn's – armour, wounds and 'poise'.²³³ Even the ending of 'The Child' has a characteristically dark, even nihilistic attitude recalling Gunn's early collections: 'The world in which we made you is not kind.'²³⁴

If Gunn was influenced even slightly by Tiller, and the many echoes are striking, this is yet another instance of a Forties connection to a Fifties Movement poet. However, rather more even than Gunn, it seems that Geoffrey Hill had been reading his Tiller by the time he came to write his first major published poem, the prize-winning 'Genesis' of 1952. The opening poem in *Unarm, Eros*, 'With the Gift of this Book', ends with a couplet whose diction ('no myth will', 'blood') clearly echoes Hill's poem: 'No myth will ever come to any good: / but biting the wasp's apple; being blood.' The next poem in the collection opens with an image, 'the world / rolls' that again Hill seems to have borrowed for 'Genesis'.²³⁵

The point is not to score points here at the expense of Hill, a highly allusive poet, but to observe several things at once about Tiller's writing. It was very much a part of its moment, and embedded itself with many allusions to the key moderns – and aspects of this high modern lyric style, at its ripest fruition in Tiller, were

²³¹ Duncan, *Origins of the Underground*, p. 17.

²³² Duncan, p. 21.

²³³ Terence Tiller, *Unarm, Eros* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), p. 48.

²³⁴ Tiller, p. 48.

²³⁵ 'Genesis' is collected in Geoffrey Hill, *For the Unfallen: Poems 1952–1958* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1959) but had appeared as early as 1952 in a Fantasy Press anthology from Oxford.

borrowed and continued by poets as different as Gunn, Ashbery and Hill; and therefore it is plausible to suggest that the style has never, indeed, been retired.

‘Spring Letter’, for instance, the second poem in the collection we have been discussing, is studded with echoes of other poets, some a little too near the surface to be completely absorbed.²³⁶ I suspect Tiller did not think in those terms himself, and that, indeed, following the way that Eliot managed allusion in many of his poems, was aiming for a more intertextual effect. Some examples in this poem are ‘the washed and choirboy afternoon’ with its Dylan Thomas feel; stanza four includes the words ‘body’ and ‘image’, which were popular with Yeats, especially in his Byzantium and Apocalyptic poems. The same poem gives us the very Yeatsian ‘awful beauty’; and a ‘tigerish whirlwind’ that feels like Eliot to me.

All Tiller’s early collections are just a little marred by this fledgling tone whose imitative qualities are often very near the surface, where influence bleeds into homage or pastiche; but this can be read too as a poetic device. Gusts of Yeats (‘sensual imaginings’) and Eliot move in and across the poems, like sand across the Sahara. At the time, this likely made them at one within the modern lyric tradition and, perhaps to some readers, unoriginal-sounding apprentice work. However, after more than sixty-five years, a clutch of the best of Tiller’s poems exemplifies the ripe end times of the modernist lyric.

Terence Tiller’s work of the Forties was written during a time of personal and career crisis, when the young writer, wishing to have an academic and literary career in England, instead found himself (for a time literally) trapped in Egypt. There, he formed associations with the *Personal Landscape* poets (associated with the expat magazine of the same name), including Bernard Spencer and Lawrence Durrell. Tiller was a teacher, not a soldier. Indeed, before his time in Egypt, he had been Research Scholar, Director of Studies, and University Lecturer in Medieval History at Cambridge.²³⁷ Like F.T. Prince then, he had to ‘work twice as hard’ as poet and scholar. He was to find the fruits of his labours disappointing. When his funding fell through, he was unable to travel to Florence to study the research materials for his

²³⁶ Tiller, *Unarm, Eros*, pp. 11–13.

²³⁷ Roger Bowen, *Many Histories Deep: The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940–45* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995), p. 95.

PhD thesis on late-medieval Pisa (again, the link to Prince's Italianate interests is noteworthy).²³⁸

Cambridge could only find him a position at Cairo, after his scholarship failed to be renewed. Like Larkin, Tiller was not a public school boy. As such, he always felt somewhat socially alienated from those *Personal Landscape* poets like Durrell, who were so educated. This idea of alienation runs throughout critical readings of his work; indeed, his Egyptian poetry collections are quite Freudian in their sense of being *unheimlich*.

The two key studies of this period and place's poetry, *Many Histories Deep: The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940–45* by Roger Bowen, and *Personal Landscape: British Poetry in Egypt During the Second World War* by Jonathan Bolton, reflect the way in which Tiller and his poetry have tended to be considered posthumously.

Bowen's chapter on Tiller, 'Terrence Tiller and the "Customary Self"', tends to the negative. Tiller (like many of the poets discussed here) is held critically accountable for a lack of maturity, or even any later development. According to Bowen, Tiller, who lived in Egypt from September 1939 to September 1946, 'betrays little or no sense of change or adjustment'. Further, his poetry remains 'frozen, in an antechamber of experience'.²³⁹ Perhaps even worse, Bowen regards him as the classic British snob, 'unimpressed by the cultural possibilities of Egypt's capital' – especially its bookshops – who never learned to read or write classical or colloquial Arabic though he spoke street Arabic fairly well.²⁴⁰ As someone without a great gift for other tongues, I rather read Tiller's acquisition of demotic Arabic to a competent degree as a sign of positive local engagement, rather than a turning away from local culture.

As Jonathan Bolton argues in *Personal Landscapes: British Poets in Egypt During the Second World War*, which reads the *Personal Landscape* poets from the perspective of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, it was not Tiller especially, but the British poets in general who tended to 'orientalise' the Arabs they met. Bolton notes how Keith Douglas found them to be 'unsavoury people' and observes that the Other, for Tiller, was not the native population of Egypt, but his own buried self, which his

²³⁸ Bowen, p. 96.

²³⁹ Bowen, p. 95.

²⁴⁰ Bowen, p. 97.

poetry explores the painful birth or rebirth of.²⁴¹ In this way, Tiller can be located within the personalism of the Apocalyptic movement, with its interest in private and mythic states and identities.

My own reading of Tiller does not dwell on his ‘orientalist reaction’ to Egypt as alienating, to his ‘colonial disdain’ or how he ‘dispenses with locality’. I would like to note that, if Tiller is to be read as a lyrical modernist, and a precursor to abstract lyricism, then his tendency to base his poetry on a ‘level of abstraction’ is not entirely surprising, or uninteresting.²⁴²

While Bowen may be right to observe that Terence Tiller was not a totally sympathetic visitor to Egypt, such an interpretation seems slightly over-determined; in expecting a direct empirical response from Tiller, relating his poems to the ‘exterior’ factuality of Arabic/Islamic culture, Bowen is de facto asking for a style that was not the poet’s own. Tiller was not a Thirties poet (in the sense of being journalistic or openly political).

Tiller, a young and sensitive scholar confronting financial struggles as the world battered itself to death, unable to leave a strange and remote city, might be excused for being a little overwhelmed. It would be nice to think that such a young man would have arrived in Cairo with the sensibilities of thirty or forty years later, but he did not – and his relative aloofness could be blamed on rather more private reasons than an ideology of cultural superiority; in fact, we know that Tiller felt socially insecure among his Western peers.

Bowen notes that one of his colleagues, Robin Fedden, considered Tiller the most formally astute of the poets writing for *Personal Landscape*, the one with the most metaphysical bent, the poet most dedicated to strict prosody and with a ‘curious tensity of style’.²⁴³ It is a style that, in many ways, exemplifies an ideal of ‘stylishness’, a ‘hybrid, joining Auden with Eliot’ (as Bowen calls it), and that is what I will explore below, by reading a few key poems from his three Egyptian books.

Tolley is another critic of Tiller’s that has little good to say about his style, which he feels is borrowed from Empson: ‘Tiller often proceeds as Empson did with

²⁴¹ Jonathan Bolton, *Personal Landscapes: British Poets in Egypt During the Second World War* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 53–58.

²⁴² Bowen, p. 102.

²⁴³ Bowen, p. 113.

a series of sententious phrases.²⁴⁴ Tolley feels Tiller emphasises the image too much, so that ‘the imagery often takes over the poem’. It is hard to see how a poem can be both too sententious and image-based at once (they are different forms of poetic argument).²⁴⁵ Tolley has problems with Tiller’s syntax, too, and his general tone: ‘The weakness of Tiller’s less good poetry is its excessive obliqueness. There is an overelaboration of sensitive observation and the appearance of subtlety of distinction that is not sustained by further acquaintance. This goes along with a syntactical elusiveness.’²⁴⁶

I am not sure what Tolley means precisely by ‘further acquaintance’. How long does one have to live with a Tiller poem to discover that its ‘subtlety of distinction’ is only a sham, I wonder? The ‘overelaboration of sensitive observation’ is another way of saying, as Duncan did, that Tiller is very sensitive and sensuous in his attention to his own self and to the world around him; it is exactly this passionate intensity that distinguishes the Forties Style, and that I welcome.

As for syntactical elusiveness, this is another aspect of Tiller’s style that is attractive – his lines are able to weave their arguments through rather complex contortions – as in ‘Egyptian Dancer’, as we shall see, to superb performative effect. Tiller’s style – much like Ashbery’s – employs and enjoys the artifice of poetic rhetoric and expression to explore and display the meanderings of a sensitive, even dandyish elegance of intellection.

Tolley also quotes Alan Ross as observing in a review that Tiller is ‘charming, full of grace’ and like Donne. It is hard to imagine a poet so damned for his gifts. Tolley himself also notes the ‘brilliance and coldness’ of Tiller’s work, and that it is ‘impressively memorable’.²⁴⁷

Tolley ultimately concludes that Tiller is a sort of figurehead for all that goes wrong at the end stages of full-blown high modernism, confirming my own sense that his poetry is, in fact, poetic modernism at its ripest apex: ‘We seem to encounter one of the elements of modernism carried to the point of self-defeat: the life of the surface is over-developed, with the consequence that feeling is less effectively brought into focus.’ Still, there is ‘a parade of sensitivity’.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁴ Tolley, *Poetry of the Forties*, p. 50.

²⁴⁵ Tolley, p. 50.

²⁴⁶ Tolley, p. 50.

²⁴⁷ Tolley, p. 51.

²⁴⁸ Tolley, p. 52.

John Press, poet and critic, in his *Rule and Energy*, also has ambiguously positive problems with Tiller. His poems are ‘bafflingly difficult, because of their elaborate texture, the subtlety of Tiller’s emotional perceptions, the darting, elusive quality of his thought, and the wealth of scholarship with which he loads his verse’.²⁴⁹ This almost sounds like Eliot.

His best poems are those ‘uncluttered by ornate trills, the argument not smothered beneath a profusion of glittering images’. Again, we see that the problem with Tiller is in his excessively ornate gifts. He is ‘most successful when he keeps his eye on the object, and restrains his fancy from adventuring into recondite fields of speculation or into labyrinths of brilliant imagery’.²⁵⁰ When he rules his energies, then.

Though unable ‘to enjoy or even grasp the drift of much that Tiller has written’, Press does concede that the poet has ‘a formidable talent’. It may be that Tiller is not fully English: ‘the poetic learning and the rhythmical complexity derive from the Italian and French elements in our culture and in our language’ – making him sound, intriguingly, a lot like F.T. Prince, with his own ‘Italian element’.²⁵¹

It is hard to think all this could be down to one man – brilliant and cold, a parade of sensitivity, sententious, image-rich, scholarly, darting, baffling, glittering, ornate, charming, full of grace – and one begins to wonder if what we have here is a failure of criticism itself at the period – a moment Tolley, Ross, and others could not conceive of a different style, another modern way, which was both emotive and aesthetic, engaged with depth and surface. In short, that this Forties Style of daring, glaring opposites, essentially fused in Tiller’s work, rather than being praised for its originality and extension of previous modern modes simply blows all critical fuses; does not compute.

For me, Tiller’s 1940s collections almost form one continuous and developing work, and, far from being frozen, develop across the books, while maintaining an unusual consistency of theme and concern. As is perhaps the most remarked upon aspect of his work, Tiller was interested in the ‘inner animal’ growing within the body of the common, smiling public man – in many ways, a personalized, Freudian myth

²⁴⁹ John Press, *Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry Since the Second World War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 216.

²⁵⁰ Press, p. 217.

²⁵¹ Press, p. 220.

borrowed from the rough beast slouching to Bethlehem to be born; in Tiller, it will be born in Cairo, close by, and the birth pangs are in tune with the world at war; in short, the neurotic conflicts in the personality of the poet result in the breaking through of a less ordered chaotic sense of self, or sensuousness. In the third collection, this spiritual/erotic rebirthing is paralleled by the birth of a daughter, a striking emergence of an apparently biographical detail that also manages to imitate Yeats's daughter poetry.

Tiller is much taken with images of gestation and nascence – and his sense of the fertility within (and the struggle it engenders) is markedly influenced, not only by Yeats, or Eliot's reflections on sterility, but Dylan Thomas, whose 'narcissistic' reflections on womb and tomb so bothered Holbrook. Tiller is peculiarly taken with this subject, and his best-known poems tend to feature mirrors and doubled selves reminiscent of their expressionist (and symbolic) use in the 1940s films of Orson Welles (notably, *Citizen Kane* and *The Lady from Shanghai*). That Tiller saw films, and enjoyed film noir, seems evident from the final poem in his three Forties books, 'Detective Story', starring a heroine who looks like Veronica Lake.

I list here the thirty or so poems of Tiller's I feel are particularly of note, and would need to form the basis of any selected collections of poems that might one day bring his work back into print: 'For Doreen'; 'XX'; 'XXVIII'; 'XXX'; 'XXXII'; 'Egypt 1940' (*Poems*); 'IV' [The silence that I break was more profound]; 'V' [The lines that mathematics draw]; 'Examination Room'; 'Egyptian Restaurant'; 'Egyptian Dancer'; 'Sphinx'; 'XXVI' [Since I have written strange and arrogant words]; 'Folk Song'; 'The Birth of Christ' (*The Inward Animal*); 'Substitutes'; 'Spring Letter'; 'Perfumes'; 'Hands'; 'Face'; 'Roman Portraits'; 'Camels'; 'Flare'; 'Lecturing to Troops'; 'Armistice'; 'Double Weather'; 'Balcony'; 'The Phoenix Hour'; 'The Child'; 'Detective Story' (*Unarm, Eros*). It is not possible here to closely read all of Tiller's work, but I would like to consider a few of the poems in more depth.

Poems, published in 1941, is the most arch-lyrical of the three collections that form his Forties trilogy. A brief consideration of opening lines shows the diction and register: 'In the unloosed fantastic summer weather'; 'the instant splendor, the swung bells that speak'; 'they rode ahead of death on the strong turning'; 'Salt waters was the oval fish, and flash'; 'Crouched in the womb I learned this fear'; 'Running to you, as the sad beast runs home'; 'Lovers have wept and been afraid'; 'All were

lovely and with vivid souls'; 'Consider, metaphysical my heart'; 'The Grecian tulip and the gothic rose'; and, in the collection's final poem, 'Now the night finds us; the bright worlds advance.'²⁵²

It is not hard to detect the Yeatsian diction (beast, vivid); or the tropes of Eliot and Thomas ('wept and been afraid'; 'in the womb'). Tiller is very much under the sway, here, of the modern poets of the 1920s and 1930s, as a young poet of the time would have been. What marks him out is, of course, that he is actually in the desert that Yeats had only imagined the rough beast slouching in, and his fear, though arguably metaphysical, has a historical cast to it – he was surrounded in a war-torn part of North Africa.

Even given his rhetorical precursors, his own rhetoric is always inflected with both belatedness and urgency that end up making his final collection of the Forties particularly impressive. Also of note is that Tiller's poems are – in rather contemporary fashion – not capitalised at the start of each line, but only every new sentence (unlike, for instance, the work of Nicholas Moore). This allows for the elegant fluidity of the work to be displayed more effectively, and in this way he was ahead of his time, stylistically. Of the 1941 poems, one stands out, 'XX':

Lovers have wept and been afraid
because they found all beauty come
down to the biting of the spade
and the falling back of the loam.

But the wild blue-eyed unicorn
rages upon the heraldic air;
the brooding eyes within us mourn
there. You are burnt with beauty there.

The legend or the virgin dies;
the trembling beast beside her stands
watching the sun between her thighs
and the white garland of her hands.

Painted or dreamt her life and his,
her death and his, steady-starred:

²⁵² Terence Tiller, *Poems* (London: Hogarth Press, 1941), p. 40.

they have two immortalities,
the chevron of a sudden bird.²⁵³

The argument of this poem seems to be the following – lovers, confronted with the burial of a beautiful love object (death) have cried and been afraid; in the ‘heraldic air’ paradoxically the fictional beast the unicorn ‘rages’ very much immortal, as on the Grecian urn of Keats; beauty sings us in this ceremonial and artificial realm seemingly untouched by mortality.

Following the familiar myth of the unicorn, and as all poets of courtly love knew (and many weavers of tapestries), only a virgin maiden could gentle the fabulous beast and allow it to be captured, even slain. And so, either the virgin dies in pursuit of the tamed beautiful ideal (is deflowered) or the legend dies (chaste, ideal love); in the final stanza, we have the Yeatsian sense of the interpenetration of forces and things – the dancer and the dance are intermingled – and so too are the unicorn and the hunter-virgin – both are immortal – are, like the chevron of a ‘sudden bird’, a kind of phoenix event, perhaps (the unicorn was a symbol of the Incarnation). Chevrons were a key part of heraldic design; and used by the Spartans, those most warlike of ancient Greeks.

Tiller is fascinated by the tension between the actual, the body with its sexual force, its rage, its blood and desire, and the cultivated achievements of art and religious poise – or war and peace; or war, and states of truce, or amnesty. His Cairo was one such false oasis of Edenic calm, just before the rim of total war; and so too, was his outsider’s Englishness a veil that drew him apart from the Egyptians he saw and met. His life, in study, work and poetry, as well as personal passion, was such a balanced tension between passion’s sorrows and the consolations of aesthetic display; one thinks here of the Freudian aperçu that all art is born of suppressed libido.

The two immortalities are those of being painted (art) and dreamt (desired, imagined) – so that, again, this erotic, mythological relationship exists in several temporal dimensions beyond the daily. Art and dreams are not one, but two. We see, in reading this poem, the intricacy of Tiller’s craft, and the thought behind the poems – where lyricism is put to complex and ambiguous work, employing expert

²⁵³ Tiller, *Poems*, p. 40.

knowledge of various fields. This is poetry at home with the heart and the mind, the passions and the intellect.

Tiller's second collection, published two years later in 1943, is a further elaboration on these themes, and more. It opens with a brief foreword:

The first and the last of these poems present (in a social and a religious mode respectively) the pattern of a personal experience that must now have been shared by many. The rest of the book is my own mode of this experience. Now that the war has taken millions from their familiar environment and associates, its impact and the impact of strangeness must have shaken, and perhaps destroyed, many a customary self. There will have been a shocked and defensive rebellion; reconciliation must follow; the birth of some mutual thing in which the old and the new, the self and the alien, are combined after war. This childbirth is not easy; the pain is sure to be there.

For myself, and for many in the same or a worse position, I have tried to express the three parts of this pattern: the first distress; rebellion against place and circumstance; slow mutual absorption ending in the birth of something at once myself and a new self and Egypt. The 'inward animal' is this child, so unwillingly conceived and carried, so hardly brought forth.²⁵⁴

This is a useful passage; it reminds us of aspects of the Forties that are in some ways strange to us now: the idea of a displacement of millions, so that a 'social mode' can address a personal yet universal experience of uprootedness; the religious mode; and the need to justify the recourse to 'personal experience' through contextualising it, historically.

The personal mode is still with us, and though it may be somewhat hackneyed now to use a trope of gestation to explore self-discovery, personal growth, and even more radical challenges to the inner self, the method and aims are clear. Taken in the context of postcolonial criticism of Tiller, this statement seems to excuse his apparent discomfort in Egypt. He admits to feelings of 'distress', then 'rebellion against place and circumstance' and finally 'slow mutual absorption'.

Tiller did not choose to be stranded in Egypt, strange to him and new, and it clearly, coinciding as it did with the war, overwhelmed him with its various sights and sounds. What seems admirable, at least to me, is how he sought to take these

²⁵⁴ Terence Tiller, *The Inward Animal* (London: Hogarth Press, 1943), p. 8.

experiences and locate some order, some aesthetic synthesis, in them – not least because they were ‘shared by many’.

At the heart of the collection lies a sequence of poems, ‘XIV’ to ‘XVIII’. These five poems, given the stated aims of the book, explore dualities of image, reflection and self in terms expressly erotic and Egyptian (restaurants, belly-dancers) and also religious (Coptic Church) They form the midway of Tiller’s Forties trilogy and warrant further exploration. One of the best known of his poems is ‘Egyptian Restaurant’.²⁵⁵

Now I have dropped a stone in the reflection,
broken the room into a thousand rooms:
a thousand edges of acute refraction
blaze in the mirrors, in whose toss of beams

we sit as under a spray of images,
real where all is fleeting, plural, like
the circling crowd of jeweled ghostly Us.
Here is a stir, a glare, to crush the weak!

—rustle and babble and clang, fearful illusion
of lights and odours, doubling and gone and again,
where the soft-footed waiters tread precision
to terror’s edge, and yet are voiced like men.

Crossing and re-crossing, the dark faces,
earth under flower pots, wetly gape and gleam;
are lost in brightness, fall in tiny pieces,
move in and out of an appalling womb

as food is built and broken. Among these
one, who can clutch with bitterness the last
infirmity, the knowledge that he is:
he droops his shoulders like the fading rest,

stares down the room where it is always raining
—lost in a mist of mirrors as in tears,

²⁵⁵ Bernard Spencer has a poem of the same title; and one also titled ‘Egyptian Dancer’ – suggesting mutual influence and discussion among the *Personal Landscape* group.

Cloth over arm, silver and glassware shining
—a mournful waiter among the chandeliers.

*Restaurant El Hati, Cairo*²⁵⁶

This poem opens up a rather surprising dichotomy, or union of disunified subjects – for the poem begins in the image-conscious, visually fragmented and multiple mind of the poetic speaker, but turns its grounding to find ‘one’ who has the ‘knowledge that he is’ unlike the ‘we’ dining party the ‘I’ is part of. Both the I and the One are ‘lost in a mist of mirrors as in tears’ – but only the one knows the way out; the I is ‘fleeting, plural’ – lost in a ‘crowd of jeweled ghostly Us’. Or maybe they – the we, I, us and one – are all equally lost in the trope of endless infinite mirrors.

This seems to me the best poem on multiplicity of self in relation to ideas of indeterminacy and observation (ideas brought forth by Freud, modern physics and Picasso, among others) that we have from the period – and it reminds me of the epistemological poem about the ‘variousness of things’ that we get in Louis MacNeice’s ‘Snow’ with its ‘drunkenness of things being various’. I also think, of course, of cinema, and especially Welles, who made divided selves and mirrors something of a specialty, though it may be Shakespeare in discussion with Banquo’s Ghost that offers the textual basis for such thought.

This is not just a slice of life poem – a poem occasioned by a trip to a restaurant – and the diction veers between the precise and the precious, wonderfully: ‘edges of acute refraction’ sounds scientific; ‘toss of beams’ is more lascivious and gay. There is a desire, as we have seen, in some critics of Forties poetry, to always locate the moment the poet becomes ever more lucid and empiricist; this poem by Tiller is certainly concerned with observational data, but is not anecdotally simplistic.

It is followed by ‘Street Scene’ – the poetic speaker has escaped the seemingly infinite confines of the mirrored dining world of El Hati, and is now on ‘Rue Soliman Pasha, Cairo’.²⁵⁷ Tiller does want the reader to appreciate the specificity of location, here – these poems are extended in space as well as time. The opening lines again show the concern with seeing and self: ‘Down glittering rows the

²⁵⁶ Tiller, *The Inward Animal*, p. 27.

²⁵⁷ Tiller, *The Inward Animal*, p. 28.

windows run / displaying you in shoes or books' – the 'you' being a woman whose 'silk and linen' is draped on 'a thousand simpering yous in wax'.

There is something disturbingly fragmented and reified about the female you that the poetic speaker sees, on this shopping street – for she is identified with parts of commodities – shoes and books, silk and linen. And she is cut up and divided into the suitably melodramatic 'thousand' pieces. At least, we might reflect, this you is at least partly made of books, a nice counterpoint to the potentially sexist 'shoes'.

In the last stanza, the poet becomes 'a maker-image too' as 'the passing images of you / along my busy street' affect him. In this sense, Tiller brings to bear the idea, in physics, that the observer alters the experiment. By observing the female love object, Tiller has himself reflected back in the myriad windowpanes, himself become an image-maker, making images of himself. And also, textually, his poem is a repeated image of the poem before, only now the we is an I, and they have escaped the interior mirrors, and found themselves lost without each other's real presences.

In the next poem, 'Elegy II', subtitled '*Shop Window*' [Tiller's italics], the theme is explored further. 'In the confused magnificence of love / is no community, but unsharing crowds / of shuttered faces where no secrets move.'²⁵⁸ Though set in Cairo, the poem also mentions the great London shopping street, Regent Street, and ends above the bustle of the city described: '[...] For he loves you still / who leans and weeps upon the window-sill.' We are a long way from Eliot's bored men leaning out of their windows. Tiller's emotionality is cinematic in its setting and its expressiveness.

The poem is odd for breaking into a rant halfway through – 'Never believe us; poets tell you lies: / the burglar breaks the window, and the door / blows inwards, and pictures tatter loose.' The argument here is a bit unclear, but it seems as if the poet is somehow being compared to the burglar, whose robbery has unexpected consequences even after having gone, leaving a windy house behind, that damages the art inside (art not worth stealing). It is trite to say that poets lie, and one wonders what it means in a poem that ostensibly ends with a poet weeping over a lost love.

This returns us to the muddled magnificence of the opening. Awkward syntax tells us that there is no community in the confused magnificence of love – only unsharing crowds. This is a paradoxical claim, and one worth trying to tease out.

²⁵⁸ Tiller, *The Inward Animal*, pp. 29–30.

Love is not a public good, but selfish and crowded – it is, in short, neither exclusive nor caring. We are in the midst of a love triangle. But also one thinks of the shuttered faces (of Muslim women?) on the Cairo streets.

In the second stanza, Tiller writes: ‘Behind the dreaming shutters of our faces / the spider fingers thoughts, and we dissect / with sharp artistic hands our gains and losses.’ One detects here echoes of Eliot’s ‘automatic hand’ that puts on the gramophone. The faces, then, are the faces of the houses on the street, windows shuttered, but also those who walk those streets, as if closed to visitors or strangers. In this sense, the exterior and the interior again change places, mirroring each other in imagery, as Tiller is wont to do.

In the final stanza Tiller notes – and not without drama or complaint – that ‘our delight will never be alone’. Love, too, requires more than one person; but in such crowded places expect a mad bustle, not disciplined order; ardour is confused, but also magnificent. Or so the lying poet has found, weeping out over the public air.

In ‘Coptic Church’ that follows, ‘magnificence’ again is found, but now the duplicity is with the priests, not the poets, as Tiller discerns how ‘the blazoned myth of Horus lies / within these faded images / where glowed Mithraic pigment in / the Thracian monks’ symbolic line’ – a splendid four lines. The image reveals images below, doubled up across time; religion is a series of identities interleaved, a palimpsest: ‘the dust of worship in the wall, / the worship of ourselves in God’. Again, Tiller notes how the exterior, the wall, is within also (in God, ourselves) – or rather, how exteriorized forces and aspects (art, poetic words, performance) reveal the inner depths they both seek to contain but ineluctably release.²⁵⁹

Release of the inner through outer performance culminates in Tiller’s crowd-pleaser: ‘Egyptian Dancer’. This topic was something of a shared pleasure among Tiller’s crowd, as Bernard Spencer has a similar poem with the same title. Tiller’s poem has not aged well, at least on the surface – a straightforward male gaze appreciating the exotic, erotic charms – the body in motion and display – of a foreign woman, being paid, as a quasi-sex worker, to entertain men – is arguably a little sexist:

²⁵⁹ Tiller, *The Inward Animal*, pp. 30–31.

Slowly, with intention to tempt, she sidles out
 (a smile and a shake of bells)
in silver, tight as a fish's, and a web
of thin-flame veils, and her brown buttery flesh
(but she is a mermaid with twelve metal tails)
 glimpsed or guessed by seconds.

Slowly the insidious unison sucks her in,
 and the rhythm of the drums,
the mournful feline quavering whose pulse
runs through her limbs; shivering like a bride
she lifts her arms into a lyre; there comes
 a sense of nakedness

As the red gauze floats off; and of release.
 She is all silver-finned:
It hangs from wrist and ankle, she is silver-
feather-crowned, tight silver across the breasts;
skirt of bright strips; and where in the fat forced up
 her navel winks like a wound.

The dance begins; she ripples like a curtain;
 her arms are snakes
—she is all serpent, she coils on her own loins
and shakes the bells; her very breasts are alive
and writhing, and around the emphatic sex
 her thighs are gimlets of oil.

All the half-naked body, as if tortured
 or loving with a ghost,
labours; the arms are lifted to set free
atrocious lust or anguish, and the worms
that are fingers crack as croupe or bust
 or belly rolls to the drums.

Wilder: the drift of the sand-spout the wavering
 curve of the legs grow a blaze
and a storm while the obsession of music hammers and wails
to her dim eyes to her shrieking desire of the flesh
that is dumb with ecstasy of movement and plays

fiercely the squirming act

and sweat breaks out she is bright as metal while the skirt
spins like a flower at her hips
into the last unbearable glorious agony
between the lips and suddenly, it is over:
a last groan of the drum, panting she drops
into the darkness of past love.²⁶⁰

One wants to subtitle this poem ‘Girls! Girls! Girls!’ It is astonishingly explicit and erotic, for its time; one searches in any of Larkin (who presumably enjoyed such things) for any sensuous description of female sexual performance (or pleasure) as visceral; this is empiricism with gusto, well ahead of the Movement in some ways. Formally, too, it breaks refreshingly with more orthodox modes of syntax, dropping commas in rushed lines like ‘and sweat breaks out she is bright as metal while the skirt’. Of course, we cannot help but think of Frank Kermode’s work on the image of the dancer in this context.²⁶¹

The dancer is, also, the poet, and the poet’s poem. We have been warned that the poet lies. The poet also performs. The opening line slowly, with intention to tempt, sidles out, just as the line says the subject does. The drum-rhythm is the rhythm of poetry, and the ecstatic pulse that sees the dancer end in the darkness of ‘past love’, orgasmically drained, is also the text. Subject and text are one. But, as we know, it is also a poem of watching, and of lust, and of frank appreciation, so there is an onanistic, narcissistic sense of self-regard in the text – the text is turning itself on with its jouissance.

There are a number of striking phrases and images in the poem, disarmingly erotic: ‘silver across the breasts’; ‘coils on her own loins’; ‘breasts are alive / and writhing’; ‘the emphatic sex’. Her navel that ‘winks like a wound’ manages to combine a rather violent allusion to a vagina, and an eye – apt, since again, this is a poem about exterior and interior birth, the birth, in this case, of desire enacted, and desire fulfilled.

²⁶⁰ Tiller, *The Inward Animal*, pp. 31–32.

²⁶¹ See Frank Kermode, *The Romantic Image*.

The second half of the poem gives us the ‘half-naked body’ – for indeed, the poem is half over. In the penultimate stanza, the opening word is ‘Wilder’ and then the colon indicates that that is also an order the poem is bound to obey.

I now turn to a few key poems from his final book of the Forties trilogy, *Unarm, Eros*. This collection of thirty poems is introduced on the title page with a quote from the Yeats poem, ‘Sailing to Byzantium’: ‘The unpurged images of day recede; The Emperor’s drunken soldiery are abed; Night resonance recedes ...’²⁶²

Tiller’s typographical use of ellipsis here is a way of emphasising how both day and night recede after the evening revelry – how images of day, and night resonances, terminate. But not for Tiller, whose book, in titular fashion concerned with a martial figuration of erotic love – the love of soldiers, the battle of love – seeks to express and explore both the images and the resonances of days and nights in Egypt during wartime. As such, the poems occupy temporal occasions of blazing sunlight, or shade and darkness.

This preoccupation with the dual meaning, and implications, of the image – both as ocular, empirically-observed thing, and as romantic symbol (pace Yeats) – drives Tiller. In ‘Substitutes’ the ‘private sadness’ is squeezed ‘until words / pearl; round it, and all images become / the private sadness and the life; and a name / blood’.²⁶³ The self’s identity in language, the name, is made flesh and blood in a creative act that is half Mass, and half cleansing of a wound; the image of the words pearled around the squeezed sadness is almost physically gross in its implications, but also reminds us how the oyster dies when cut open to retrieve the pearl. The main point for Tiller is how the private myth, the self-story, generates, now, the poem – as it also did for Yeats, if not as explicitly. Tiller advocates ‘going in and not around’ – ‘sucking the earth as wheat; become a field’. There is no substitute for being in the thing one writes of, for being that thing (much as Berkeley felt God put the heat into fire, the cold into ice) – the poet transcends myth by entering the mythic world, as an actuality: ‘being blood’.

This idea is more flamboyantly expressed in ‘Spring Letter’,²⁶⁴ which makes clear the division between the poetic speaker (‘me’) and ‘the world’; the world is not

²⁶² Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 267.

²⁶³ Terence Tiller, *Unarm, Eros*, p. 10.

²⁶⁴ Tiller, p.11.

the ‘more inward thing’ of ‘calm acres’ and ‘Mozartean air’, or ‘spring’ – just as ‘a wet garment on the body shows / the curl of limb and muscle, this day / droops in the shape of secret images’. The epistemology of this poem is a little unclear, but I think that the argument is as follows – the world presses like wet clothing on to a deeper (and stronger thing) – paradoxically, a muscular body, an ironic trope for an inner self, especially as that inner self is compared to air and spring – elemental aspects of calm; calm the world and its wartime violence (‘the cold / indecency of outward violence’) threatens.

In the poem’s fifth stanza, Tiller explores this paradox of outer and inner connexion, these tissues of violence and order, of world and self, in terms of love:

Love, and the lovely clothing of its play,
its thinking film upon the flesh; the stride
and ache of afterthought to our long woe
our tenderness, the hangman of the blood:
here in your flowered scarf of Egypt, deep
as seasons under water, blooms our good.

This poem is Shakespearian in style – iambic, rhetorical and verbally playful – and, again, one sees here the Elizabethan impact often thought to emanate from Gunn by way of Yvor Winters. Perhaps, though, we are closest to Herrick’s ‘Upon Julia’s Clothes’. Tiller sets up a series of binary oppositions that align with his earlier list of what is of the world, and what of the self, or soul – a properly theological catalogue to be made in the desert: love/lovely clothing of its play; flesh/thinking film – so that the body corresponds to the Platonic ideal (love), with its flesh contrasted with the artifice above – the clothing, the thinking film, that plays like spume upon the surface. It is this artifice, this tenderness that hangs the blood – that holds the body at bay with its desires, another paradox. The rainy seasons, deep under water, bloom – the surface is sand.

Tiller’s complex metaphysical conceits develop in ‘Hands’, which continues his use of tropes of love and vision, of language and what lies beneath. In it, we can begin to discern his poetics of sensuous rhetoric – that is, his equivocation of rhetorical forms, in speech and poetry, with shapes of desire in the world, and the inner self. ‘Hands’ needs to be presented in full:

Eyes are the spoken word, but dark
will make them silent, where
the lovely shapes of rhetoric
have no-one left to hear.

A body built into an arm,
and the blood shouting, still
though passionate as heat, is dumb
like a kind animal.

Of seven kisses that have speech
in characters or times,
none is a messenger of much:
they only tell their names.

Hands are like letters to be read
in braille or fire; they light
the body that becomes their road,
the mind they re-create.

Subtle in mood or motion, they
are thoughts of silent men;
and able messengers, to be
not-thoughtless for their own.

They that carry everything,
learning and thinking, look
past one another to the tongue
within, that will not speak.

The body in its amorous belt,
or eyes and lips that meet,
know nothing that they have not felt,
say nothing they forget.

And darkness the girl-eater has
no power upon them: give
to lust the subtlest of his ways
—only the hands can love.²⁶⁵

Readers of Tiller will be familiar with his counter-intuitive statements ('only the hands can love') that play with metaphysical wit. Here the argument seems to be, again, an inversion of the physical and interior planes of experience that borders on a Gnostic heresy: the transcendent world, the True, as it were, can only be located in the fallen world. In this instance, the claim is that, during erotic courtship, 'foreplay' and love-making, darkness shuts off the power of the eyes, and 'the lovely shapes of rhetoric', the visible signs of persuasive passion, the eyes, 'speak'. In short, the seductive powers of looking, and even kissing (emphasised for their verbal tropes of rhetoric and tongues) are failed orators, or courtiers, once the night comes and lovers are abed. Only the hands can locate and express 'love' despite darkness being 'a girl-eater' that devours the sexual object and pull desire from the abyss of pure carnality, into the firelight of 'learning and thinking' – for hands 'carry everything' – even bearing the girl up out of the darkness of sex, to somewhere altogether calmer (not 'the shouting of blood'). I am not sure this is a convincing argument, but it is certainly an ornate and clever one.

It introduces the secret image of these poems – a high lyricism turning – like a twisting, convulsed lover – on the bed of its own metaphysical making, fluently enjoying the paradoxes unleashed when poetry is both modern and romantic, as much Forties poetry sought to be: personal, and mythic, in the Yeatsian sense, but also in a sense closer to an ideal of private myth. These are poems about rhetoric, using rhetoric to question and, indeed, enact the limits of rhetoric. They are performative. They perform their problematic poetics. One cannot accuse these poems of merely being stylish, even sentimentally so: they are supremely stylish. They bracket style and seek to bleed it of meaning; the blood being ink.

This reaches its crescendo in a strange poem near the end of *Unarm, Eros*, 'The Phoenix Hour':

²⁶⁵ Tiller, *Unarm, Eros*, pp. 15–16.

Do not expect again a phoenix hour...

Grasp without hands, tell without lips, possess
utterly, without ceremonies of sex:
wedded like rays beneath a burning-glass,
clever and bodiless.

But love be many in surfeiting and lacks,
the brittle fury of the act, and in
all flowerings of your wild swans' marvelous necks:
until the heart learns locks.

Not love be amnesty (Love be alone
in Thebaid hours) nor man's magnificence:
oh inaccessible bird whistling to stone
death to this dirty town.

For love and Love are not alike in tense.
Twinning of blood by certainty is true.
Society is disobedience,
present but nowhere hence.

I have made this charity for two
—hysterica caritas mounting towards the voice
—seeing the lonelier way out for you,
but nothing else to do.²⁶⁶

The Thebaid hours are those of desert monks in fifth-century Egypt in the Thebaid region – but also, in a brilliant ambiguity, the epic work of Statius (*Seven Against Thebes*), which was significant during the Middle Ages (Chaucer, Dante, Spenser and others borrowed from it). Statius' Virgil-inspired style was also, along with its martial themes of war, rhetorically sophisticated.

Here, Tiller fuses monastic austere devotion (Love with a capital L) with the rhetoric of epic poetry, and courtly love – in such cases, the rhetorical is the spiritual, artificial and devoted, neo-Platonic – the possession utterly, without 'ceremonies of sex'. There is a passionate verbal art, then, that poetry allows access to, which has

²⁶⁶ Tiller, *Unarm, Eros*, p. 42.

the ceremonial grandeur of noble war and religious devotion, yet is unblooded by physical touch – ‘wedded like rays’ that are ‘clever and bodiless’.

Tiller is on a search for a sun-cleansed ontology for love – one beyond a ‘brittle fury’ (one recalls in this the second stanza of ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’, and also the ‘uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor’ from ‘The Magi’²⁶⁷). Love might be like the phoenix. The phoenix, an Egyptian mythological creature, was based in Heliopolis, home of the Sun-God, Ra. The burning away after centuries, of this beautiful firebird, to release a new version of its exquisite song, promises a resurrection.²⁶⁸

In the First Letter of the Corinthians, Paul writes of Caritas (charity) as being one of the three greatest gifts, after faith and hope.²⁶⁹ Caritas is a pure love, generous and without guile. ‘Hysterica caritas mounting towards the voice’ – an extraordinary line – seems to be an oxymoron much like ‘terrible beauty’ – in this case, an excessively emotional, panic-stricken love (belying Paul’s claims for its serenity), about to emit as a scream, or cry of orgasmic exultation. The problem for readers of this poem is in identifying the addressee – is the poetic speaker on the verge of hysterical charity addressing a phoenix, a Yeats, a lover, himself as poet, or indeed, the poetic act or text itself? All seem likely, or equally unlikely. There is a sense of futility here – and I feel the argument underlying the poem (personal and mythic) fails to fully establish an ‘objective correlative’, as if the ‘nothing else to do’ – the dying fall of the poem – is both post-coital and post-scriptum. The poet cannot go on; the voice can do no more.

This is the paradoxical failure of Tiller’s Forties Style – its ‘marvelous’ ‘magnificence’ is often clever and bodiless – a lyric abstraction whose brilliance is one step away from the dandyish irony of The New York School, in its excessively opaque diction. Yet Tiller is no poster-boy for apocalypse. Indeed, when critics or anthologists have tended to favour his work they have hit upon his lucid Egyptian poems, of which there are several. Perhaps ‘Camels’ and ‘Lecturing to Troops’ are the best examples of a ‘Movement style’ born in the desert in the 1940s, far away from its ostensible origins in post-war 1950s Britain. As I seek to do throughout this dissertation, I want to problematise styles and stylistic periods, because the poets

²⁶⁷ Yeats, p. 181.

²⁶⁸ Wilhelm Max Müller, *Egyptian Mythology* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 31.

²⁶⁹ I Corinthians 13.

themselves did this – were various in the Forties, with their ‘anthology style’. For, no less than Prince, Tiller enjoyed a multitude of rhetorical styles and approaches (as many young poets do). Let us start with ‘Camels’:

I see them swaying their strange heads like geese,
nineteen camels in a string like geese in flight;
as if approaching a problem, or in quest
but baffled a little, a little unsure of their right.

But I am glad their supercilious look
sees as I see the powdery town, the tall
activity of streets, the buttoned-up faces,
the cars like secret agents, the want of it all.

Gentle and sure as pianists’ hands, their feet
deliberating on the stones press out
in rhythms that have nothing to do with us
the coins of their aloofness in scorn or doubt.

The motion of the blind or the very proud:
they could be blind: but where their masked eyes fall
they have the sailor’s distant and innocent gaze
for where this ends, for the limit and want of it all.

*Helwan*²⁷⁰

This poem, in diction and syntax, anticipates Larkin’s style (‘baffled a little, a little unsure’), but also contains Tiller’s blend of tropes (bodily parts, faces, masks) and slightly ornate diction (‘strange’, ‘supercilious’, ‘deliberating’). It is the acceptable face of Forties verse, perhaps – but again, not much like the war poetry of Keith Douglas.

One notes immediately the rhetorical repetition in both the first and last stanzas in lines one and two – geese twice, blind twice. There is no doubt a clever reference to blinds used to spot birds in this, but also the fact that the opening stanza opens with unlimited sky vision ‘I see’ and the last ends with a blind, or limited gaze. What this poem chiefly is, though, is a clear ‘empirical poem’ of the 1950s variety,

²⁷⁰ Tiller, *Unarm, Eros*, p. 26.

using a regular stanza, rhyme and metre (more or less) to describe a subject, camels, with witty simile and metaphor, drawing a conclusion at the end. It doesn't get 'more mainstream' than this, and, with a few edits in a twenty-first-century workshop, this would still be considered a viable poem in today's marketplace of little magazines. It is in the English line.

I think a few moments are especially Larkinesque – the list: 'the powdery town, the tall / activity of streets / the buttoned-up faces, / the cars like secret agents' – or 'rhythms that have nothing to do with us'. The last stanza, too, moves into that transcendent Larkin space – 'for where this ends'. This is Tiller writing the presumed 1950s style five years too soon, a premature Movement poet.

'Lecturing to Troops' is one of Tiller's common anthology pieces, and is even more in the Movement ambit, with the troops 'wanting girls and beer' – and Tiller as a poetic speaker (he lectured to troops) feeling 'neat and shy'. One thinks of Larkin's awkward Church-goer here. The poetic speaker decides it is 'useless to be friendly and precise'. Further on, we get that reference to smut we know from Larkin: 'The strangeness holds them: a new planet's uniform, / grasped like the frilly pin-ups in their tent'. Then, in the last stanza, Tiller references 'Prufrock', perhaps too obviously (or, as I have argued, purposely performing his belated modernist status, not-yet-postmodern) – 'But that is not what I meant'.

I wish to end my discussion of Tiller by noting his last poem of this trilogy of the Forties – his final poem in *Unarm, Eros*, 'Detective Story'.²⁷¹ It is a strange, complex, mid-length poem in three sections; each section divided into two stanzas of twenty lines – so, a poem of a hundred and twenty lines. It seems too good to be true, but here is the quintessential Forties poem, in blocks of forties, times three, echoing his trilogy of Forties books.

This is not entirely fanciful – the poem ends 'All this I read'. And the text itself is a cornucopia (no other word will do) of images, tropes, references, and merged and confused identities and confessions, as killers and victims each speak, taking on each other's voices. Indebted to the multivocal *The Waste Land*, but far more chockablock with references to mass or popular culture than Eliot ever was

²⁷¹ Tiller, pp. 51–55.

(except perhaps in ‘Macavity the Mystery Cat’) – ‘Detective Story’ is more Audenesque. It is the ur-Tiller poem.

I also say it is the quintessential Forties poem, if a critic wanted to locate one, because it effortlessly blends high and low diction, flamboyant themes and registers, is melodramatic, but also witty, romantically personal but also classical in form, and utterly forgotten now. I find it hard to imagine such a delightful, rich and clever poem – especially one about that most English of subjects, detective fiction – so overlooked now. There is arguably no poem of the 1950s (save perhaps by Larkin) written in English that is more brilliantly fun. There is a line in this poem, ‘the final wonder of my disappearing’ that we must surely be able to apply to Tiller himself. His own disappearance as a figure of poetic interest is a mystery, indeed.

What remains, for a contemporary reader, though, is Tiller’s exemplary fusion of emotionality and erudition, of personal expression, and a fearless interest in the ornate artifice of poetry, with a love of glittering image, the thrills and dangers of surface pleasures, and alertness to textual and psychic depths. Linguistically and intellectually daring, yet, indeed, sexy and romantic, Tiller is the sort of poet more poets might want to consider emulating, as they search for their own high styles at a time of political and personal challenge in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER SIX:

THE ELEGANT POETRY OF NICHOLAS MOORE

In this chapter I will be considering how Nicholas Moore's poetry has been received, both by his contemporaries, and those who later attempted to rescue him from reputational oblivion. In the process a sense of his innovative style will emerge, a style that is neither voice nor poetics based, but nonetheless offers a viable poetic way forward for poets writing now.

Moore's father, G.E. Moore, was a member of the Cambridge school of analytic philosophers. As a boy, Moore would have been well-known to the Bloomsbury Group, and would have grown up at the centre of intellectual and creative life in the London of his time; no doubt it would have surprised (and saddened) him to know that he would end his life a marginalised, obscure figure. Eddie Linden in the special 'Poetry of the Forties' edition of *Aquarius*, offers the following biographical sketch of Moore:

From 1938 to 1940, Nicholas Moore edited the periodical *Seven* with John Garland [sic – it was John Goodland]. In 1940, with Alex Comfort, he edited *Poets of Tomorrow: Cambridge Poetry 1940*, for John Lehmann at the Hogarth Press. His poetry appeared in the Apocalypse anthologies, *The New Apocalypse* (1939) and *The White Horsemen* (1941). He was an associate editor of *Poetry London*. He died on 26th January, 1986.²⁷²

In 1948, by the age of thirty, Moore's eighth collection, a selection from the period 1943–1948, arrived, a remarkable testament to a busy career (there are hundreds of Moore's poems from the period still uncollected). Moore was widely published in the leading American and British journals of the time. He was interested in American poetry, won an important prize from *Poetry* magazine, and was an early advocate of Wallace Stevens in the UK.

As it says on the back of Moore's *Carcanet Selected*, *Longings of the Acrobats*, edited by Peter Riley, his 'total neglect for nearly forty years must seem a

²⁷² Eddie Linden, 'Editor's note to "At the Start of the Forties by Nicholas Moore"', *Aquarius*, 17/18 (1986–87), 103.

mystery'; though the copy continues to add he was 'omitted from anthologies and surveys', which might help to explain the absence of any sort of canonicity surrounding his work. Compounding the original neglect is the melancholy fact that Moore's 'rediscovery' by Peter Riley was announced in 1990 and even this collection has subsequently gone out of print and become nearly as rare as the poet's various collections from the Forties. Forty years has become more or less sixty years of neglect.

Moore is not entirely forgotten, however. Iain Sinclair includes a selection of his work in the Picador anthology, *Conductors of Chaos*, as a 'precursor' to the so-called British poetry revival.²⁷³ Moore is, to many, the representative forgotten man of the time, even more so than Prince, or Tiller. His greatest misfortune, it may be, is not to have made any strong enemies, or become notorious, for he is rarely made the whipping boy of 'anti-modernism' or linguistic excess. Unlike Dylan Thomas, Moore's style did not become the benchmark against which the 1950s defined themselves; it was a style that was merely shrugged off, as if wholly uninteresting.

This almost complete disinterest in Moore marks the high point of the British turn against a mid-Atlantic style, which could have developed in tandem with other styles in the UK, maintaining a stronger link to the sort of abstract lyricism developed by the New York School. The narrative that Mark Ford relates in his essay on Moore is one of heartbreaking decline.²⁷⁴ After the publication in 1950 of the major overview of his work, his wife left him, taking their child. With the loss of his small financial support, Moore moved to a bleak suburban wasteland. There, diagnosed with diabetes, gangrenous, he lost a leg, and, more or less housebound, remained living and writing in near-total neglect until his death thirty-six years later in 1986. This pathos was unrelieved by any major publications, and only made bearable by his gardening, and his comeback in the late 1960s when he wrote dozens of eccentric pseudonymous entries for a national translation competition judged by George Steiner. In this story of Moore, the golden age is clearly the Forties, and the pinnacle is the book from 1950. The Carcanet jacket has this to say about Riley's selection:

²⁷³ *Conductors of Chaos: A Poetry Anthology*, ed. by Ian Sinclair (London: Picador, 1996).

²⁷⁴ Mark Ford, 'Nicholas Moore, Stevens and the Fortune Press' in *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, ed. by Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg (London: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 165–185.

He [Moore] was much more than a specialist in the war-time poetical styles that went out of fashion in the 1950s. Those styles drawn from the surrealists and from the work of Dylan Thomas were marginal to his main interests and when he reclaimed them he did so in a clearer and more public voice than theirs. What emerges here is a steady, increasingly powerful development of a ‘mainstream’ or ‘classical’ modernism of the kind we associate with American writing.²⁷⁵

I think this passage is telling for several reasons. There is a revealing attempt to disassociate the poet from precisely the period and context that is thought to be so damaging to his reputation – the very toxicity of the ‘war-time poetical styles’ and the ‘work of Dylan Thomas’ – that was his element; and part of the pathos of the attempt must be a fundamental misreading, I think, of the period – that is, that poets can and should be airlifted out of the Forties disaster zone and then dusted off to be as good as new again, once free of all the period nonsense. It is for this reason I have so fiercely defended the period style itself, and not just the poets, as if they could be cut away from their moment fully.

Also notable is the argument that these wartime, surrealist and Thomas-led styles were marginal to his interests – and that when he ‘reclaimed them’ (reclaimed what, the interests that were or were not his, begging the question, when did he not claim them in the first case?) – he did so in a ‘clearer and more public voice’ than they did.

Again, I feel that what is happening here is akin to a spiritual rescue mission where the priest loves the sinner but not the sins. The critical emphasis on the terms of clarity and voice seems to point either back to a Poundian rhetoric of early modernism, or forward to a more mainstream post-Movement interest in voice and identity. In either case this seems to be a mistake, since the split between the modernisms of Pound and Stevens has tended to favour Pound in the UK – whereas Moore is obviously of the party of Stevens.

Nor is his writing in any way connected to a sincere expression of empirically derived anecdotes or identity usually equated with ‘voice’ in mainstream reviewing and criticism. Moore is as out of fashion as the other ‘war-time poetical styles’ because of, not in spite of, the way his work is neither clear nor at all representative of a unified voice. Moore’s poetry in fact typifies the wide-ranging stylishly hybrid

²⁷⁵ Nicholas Moore, *Longings of the Acrobats: Selected Poems*, ed. by Peter Riley (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), back cover.

internationalism we have come to read as Forties stylishness. His work is always about style. The claim for a steady, increasingly powerful development is an already discussed myth, or false narrative, of the Forties: that anyone of worth (Graham, Larkin and Thomas) got better the sooner they got out of the period, and that their early, younger styles and selves were often marked by dramatic breaks, shifts, or radical changes in style.

This narrative need for a development, out of and beyond the Forties, for Moore, masks the unresolved anxiety that British late modernist poetry has about its forbears, and its own abandonment of them, instead turning to other fathers and mothers for models. For it has not been the fault of the oft-demonised ‘anti-modernists’ alone that poets like Moore remained ignored, isolated and out of print for decades – it is also a failure for the native British late modernists to comprehend their debt and connection to the Forties Styles, without embarrassment. Indeed, it was the Pound/Olson line of late modernism – perhaps ideally represented in the work of Basil Bunting and *Briggflatts* – that became the source for an anti-mainstream other line, post-war, in Britain – and not the work of Moore.

Finally, in reading this rich passage, let us stop to wonder at the suggested terms, ‘mainstream’ or ‘classical’ modernism. The literary term is usually ‘high modernism’, not ‘mainstream modernism’. The point being made here is meant to, once again, indicate that Moore is not a ‘late modernist’ of the Cambridge persuasion; not, following Prynne, interested in the ‘hermetic’ tradition of Pound; or the open form of Olson – but part of the genus branching off from Wallace Stevens. Moore is an ‘old school’ modernist – the dinosaur line that has been deemed defunct by many fashionable cheerleaders for ‘second wave modernism’ such as Charles Bernstein and Marjorie Perloff. So what does Riley – on this most interesting of back covers (there is no introduction) – say Moore’s style is like?

Moore was master of the short poem or poem-sequence as a versatile medium of engagement with the world, personal and poetic experience fused in all the serious, playful, lyric, and ironic ranges of a modern metaphysical.²⁷⁶

This back blurb provides as good a definition of the heterodox Forties Style as any we have found. It underlines the eclecticism of a style that embraces opposites. It is

²⁷⁶ Moore, back cover.

at once serious/playful; lyric/ironic; and personal/poetic. This is the style of a Hart Crane, of a Prince, of a Tiller, and of Moore. This is a style that influenced John Ashbery and the New York School, a style that took the play from Auden, and the seriousness from Eliot (and vice versa); the lyric from Yeats, and the irony from Pound; and learned from the way that Dylan Thomas fused his own personal vision with one that seemed mythic and universal, forging a 'New Romantic' style that was as much about the impersonal objectivity of modernism as it was about the romanticism of an earlier moment.

Moore's style is eccentric, and he employs a tone unlike any other English poet I can think of, aside from perhaps D.H. Lawrence or Stevie Smith – that is to say, in his early work even melancholy and death are turned to good, healthy use. His work is joyous, manic, optimistic, sunny and filled with enthusiasm; it seems boundless, dapper and elegant; he writes as a millionaire on a Bank Holiday Monday night, out on a picnic with his best girl – lavishing gifts, making little jokes, vain and selfless all at once – a Gatsby of wealthy joviality. Indeed, Moore's work is Jovian, and yes, in its brash open ego and heart on sleeve, more than a little 'American'. It is no wonder that his favourite American poet was surely the Wallace Stevens of *Harmonium*, that book of the 1920s that fused exuberant dandyish aestheticism with the sunny possibilities of Florida and Connecticut. It is no surprise that he wrote a poem called 'Ideas of Disorder at Torquay'.

Moore, unlike Stevens, does not seem to develop a genuinely original poetics, or a philosophy of language, imagination or creativity; he tends to simply be, to express a sense of unqualified permission, of opportunity. His poetics, and his voice, is his style. The tragic shadow of his later years, when his beloved wife Priscilla left him, should not confuse a direct reading of the Forties poems. One does not claim the sun is cold and dark because in twelve hours it will be midnight.

Moore's poetry was included, in 1949, in *A New Romantic Anthology*, edited by Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece. Commissioned in 1944, its appearance five years later feels somewhat belated, and Francis Scarfe's essay 'Romanticism in Modern Poetry' concludes, perhaps disappointingly, with the claim that 'this is no age of masterpieces; it is an age of exploration'.²⁷⁷ Scarfe identifies the 1940s as an age confronting a 'crisis of feeling' by way of Baudelaire, where young poets must

²⁷⁷ Francis Scarfe, 'Romanticism in Modern Poetry', in *A New Romantic Anthology*, ed. by Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece (London: Grey Walls, 1949), pp. 61–79 (p. 67).

use a new myth that builds from discoveries in psychoanalysis. For him, the main point is to have a ‘poetry of liberated imagination’, purged of sin, and Dylan Thomas and George Barker offer ‘language and imagery [...] purified and enriched in a great reconciliation with life’.²⁷⁸

Moore’s three poems in this anthology, ‘Charley Didn’t Have a New Master’, ‘The Hair’s Breadth’ and ‘Prayer to Nobody, Who Is Something’, are not among his best known but they are clearly representative, as far as the editors would be concerned, with the temper of the times. The first is a wonderful example of what delights those who appreciate Moore:

O in the walking mud of battle, the rattler
Walks like a strange artiste over the graves
Of the uncomfortable and the unseemly brave.

Charley hadn’t any money nor any voodoo,
No charm to keep him from the worst of battle,
He just innocently did what me and you do.

O I’m gonna wash my hands of you, you’d razz
Would you, I’m just another victim, he would sing,
Bowled over by the hot spirit of jazz.

But Charley the saint, Charley the aunt, Charley the martyr,
I salute you and bless you for everything;
Because through all this red and blue murder

You kept the heart you had. In the disaster,
Charley, the unicorn, never had a new master.²⁷⁹

The rhyme scheme ABB CAC DED FEF GG (more or less) starts and ends with rhyming couplets that are then complicated by middle lines that once don’t rhyme, graves/battle, and once do, sing/everything, with its echoes of ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. So, this jaunty, off-kilter ‘war poem’ has upbeat strains of Jazz Age mumbo-jumbo out of Cab Calloway (razz/jazz and voodoo/you do) and New Orleans funeral lingo (the martyr/blue murder). It feels like nonsense verse, but isn’t quite.

²⁷⁸ Scarfe in *A New Romantic Anthology*, pp. 63–67.

²⁷⁹ Nicholas Moore, ‘Charley Didn’t Have a New Master’, in *A New Romantic Anthology* (see Scarfe above), p. 106.

Charley (Chaplin? Delaunay? De Gaulle? Parker?) is an everyman victim, one of the muddy ‘unseemly brave’ that litter the battlefields. He had no heraldic saviour (unicorn) or ‘new master’ (master race, master plan, master as in God or commanding officer?) – but, in the midst of all the murder, he ‘kept the heart he had’. I wonder if there is a hidden code in this – that, humanity ‘ab’andoned, war is ‘cac’ that makes you ‘ded’. Perhaps not; but it is a poem whose love of life and music ‘swings’ it beyond the usual gloom of war poetry. And it has a style unafraid to break genres and cross lines.

Moore, in an article, explored the roots of his links to ‘The New Apocalypse Movement’, which he claims he started with John Goodland, his business partner in *Seven*, and Dorian Cooke (‘a young and destitute student from Leeds University’), in a flat on Inglebert Street, London,²⁸⁰ in EC1. The movement didn’t lead to ‘quite what we had expected or what we wanted’, which was ‘a more adventurous, less exclusive kind of poetry, richer and more varied in language and ideas’.²⁸¹ One is tempted to say amen to that, or, more cynically, don’t we all? Instead they got a ‘new narrowness’ and a label from Herbert Read, ‘The New Romanticism’, which was unhelpful because they wanted, instead, to ‘do away with the distinction between classic and romantic and to try and attain the same universality as was achieved by the first Elizabethans and the Metaphysicals’.²⁸² It seems hard to fathom how such an open-minded aim ended up as it did.

Before Peter Riley came to the rescue, Nicholas Moore had to contend with other readers, some more sympathetic than others. Derek Stanford, in his critical survey of 1947, *The Freedom of Poetry*, gives us a contemporary’s perspective on Moore, which, in the end, is a balanced chapter. A.T. Tolley’s brief summation in his by now familiar *The Poetry of the Forties* is far more dismissive.²⁸³

Stanford breaks his analysis of Moore into two categories, influences on style, and influences on thought. We’ll come back to style in a minute. In terms of thought, Stanford recognised the twin influences as being those of Freud and Marx. Moore, he felt, had not managed to work Marx very successfully into his poems, though in some of his earlier work he did criticise bankers and seem to predict the

²⁸⁰ Moore, p. 104.

²⁸¹ Moore, p. 104.

²⁸² Moore, p. 104.

²⁸³ Tolley, p. 110–111.

end of capitalist society. Freud is much more galvanising for him, as it helps to explain his emphasis on love as a hygiene – that is, ‘a vision of integrity by means of love’.²⁸⁴ Moore’s many poems for his wife, his many poems of love, are never, unlike Tiller’s work, firstly, erotic. If he was a Freudian, I wonder what he was aware of repressing.

Referring to an interview he had given, Stanford tells us that Moore’s favourite poet is Conrad Aiken – unintentionally poignant since Aiken is now nearly as obscure as Moore is; though then he was a respected American poet known for his francophilia, musicality and friendship with T.S. Eliot. Other acknowledged influences include Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Auden, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, Donne, Fulke Greville, and what he calls ‘oddities in their own times’, as indeed he proved to be in his. He has a ‘distaste for, for the most part’ a lively list – ‘Chaucer, Spenser, the Romantics, Wordsworth, etc.’ – begging the question, who are the etceteras?²⁸⁵

Moore, in his interview, also explains that he had a ‘Classical education’ and was ‘probably’ influenced by Homer, Euripides, Horace, Catullus, Juvenal and Sappho ‘most’. He learned from them not to ‘scan’, as ‘the fundamental underlying regularity must be there, but these regulations were made to be broken’. In fact – ‘their whole point is that they should be varied and broken’.²⁸⁶

Stanford makes an important distinction between Moore and the other Apocalyptic poets with which he was associated; whereas the ‘movement’s programme was to have been a synthesis of the Classical and Romantic idiom’, such ‘an alloy’ or fusion was never achieved, really, by Henry Treece, Dorian Cooke or J.F. Hendry, other original members from the movement’s first two anthologies. Moore diverged.²⁸⁷

Stanford emphasises Moore’s ‘popular poetics’ and how he uses ‘common speech’ – avoiding ‘the rich to over-ripe diction, the heavy lush music and exotic image so often found in Apocalyptic writing’.²⁸⁸ This could wrong-foot a reader, who might then expect Moore to be a plain, demotic poet of anecdote, perhaps in the tradition of Frost. Instead, as Stanford observes, he is interested in ‘Afric-American’

²⁸⁴ Stanford, pp. 145–46.

²⁸⁵ Stanford, pp. 138–39.

²⁸⁶ Stanford, p. 139.

²⁸⁷ Stanford, pp. 136–38.

²⁸⁸ Stanford, p. 137.

jazz and tries to get slang and popular music rhythms into his poetry. As Stanford says, ‘Poetry, according to the poet, is the language of being one’s self.’²⁸⁹ This is a splendid way of describing Moore’s style, which, while arguably using common speech, manages to say things in an idiosyncratic fashion. But not anything as simple as a ‘voice.’ Indeed, Stanford finds problems with ‘the poet’s self-indulgence with his art’.²⁹⁰

Contemporaries of Moore were no doubt astonished, perhaps even horrified, by the rather wild fecundity of his output – a succession of books and pamphlets that clearly expressed his interest more in creating poetry than in carefully honing a small elite oeuvre (in a sense, the opposite of Eliot’s publication record). This splendiferous enthusiasm of poetry creation and dissemination (reminiscent of the American Vachel Lindsay) could have appeared self-indulgent, especially as Moore was not one to censor his zanier effects and techniques, such as mad puns and goofy wordplay.²⁹¹

When language poets write like this, it can be ascribed to a creative ‘errancy’; in *Reading Error: The Lyric and Contemporary Poetry* by Nerys Williams, it is called ‘a poetics of erring’ that differs from mainstream poetry’s supposed tolerance for ‘language as a transparent medium for communicating intense emotion’ – a claim I find nebulous, since intense emotion (which all humans surely feel no matter how they are constituted as speaking subjects by ideology) can also be expressed in far less transparent ways, and in fact no poetry of any worth is ever really transparent.²⁹²

For Moore, it was merely bad form, not a poetics of errancy. Stanford calls this practice of Moore’s ‘lingual fooling’ (a nice turn of phrase), and suggests it forms almost a style-within-a-style for him – a ‘kind of second style or internal poetic skit’. This skittishness leads to such lines as ‘Wild goo-la-goosh and empty quo-me-rod’.²⁹³

Stanford far prefers mid-Forties Moore, which is tamer, ‘the style more even and sustained’, and notes that his earlier poems, with their ‘joyous informality of syntax and diction, singularly failed’ to provide any ‘memorable speech’.²⁹⁴ Try to

²⁸⁹ Stanford, p. 149.

²⁹⁰ Stanford, p. 151.

²⁹¹ An approach perhaps familiar to avant-garde readers of Charles Bernstein.

²⁹² Nerys Williams, *Reading Error: The Lyric and Contemporary Poetry*, *Modern Poetry*, I (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 15–17.

²⁹³ Stanford, p. 151.

²⁹⁴ Stanford, p. 153.

forget ‘Wild goo-la-goosh’ anytime soon. For our purposes, it is ironic that the myth of the Forties poet, constantly developing out of their Forties Style, like a teenager growing into a man, can be applied even to such a poet in mid-Forties stride. Moore got better, according to Stanford, the less fortyish he became; the more he achieved a ‘Golden Mean’.²⁹⁵

For Tolley, there was no such significant improvement. Indeed, in summing up Moore’s career, he is able to write: ‘his facile production of book after book might be seen as a symptom of the collapse of standards thought to be generally characteristic of the nineteen-forties and certainly prevalent among the “New Romantics”’.²⁹⁶ We are back in the realm of the Forties disease, with its symptoms of collapsed standards.

What were these flattened standards? Moore ‘too frequently succumbs to the sense that what sounds striking must be significant’.²⁹⁷ Indeed. For Moore, the sound, the music of poetic language was half the fun – we know that love animated it as well, love of poetry, and of his wife. It seems a hard-hearted critic indeed who would fail to appreciate the high standards in such an aesthetic. But then again, is not the word ‘significance’ the problem with criticism of Moore that finds him slight? Moore is light, but not light-verse, seriously silly, and, as Tolley says, he developed his own fusion of ‘lyricism and fantasy’, abandoning ‘any obvious rhetorical devices’.²⁹⁸ Though Moore, in the Forties, writes of winter, and war, and death, and fear (common words from the time), he seems to have a mind of summer. Moore is an original. American poetry, predicated on newness, originality and uniquely-voiced practitioners, welcomes such eccentricity, such breakers of the mould. For many British critics he represents a freedom too far.

²⁹⁵ Stanford, p. 153.

²⁹⁶ Tolley, *The Poetry of the Forties*, p. 111.

²⁹⁷ Tolley, p. 110.

²⁹⁸ Tolley, p. 111.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

PHILIP LARKIN IN THE GRIP OF GIRLS

Only mediocrities develop

– Oscar Wilde

A style is much more likely to be formed by slipshod sampling

– Philip Larkin

One of the key myths for British poetry is that the Fifties began in the 1950s. So negative was the brush of the Forties, as a label, and so strong the need for a clean post-war break, that many poetic records and careers have been reset to post-1949. A striking example of this involves the work of Philip Larkin. His first collection, *The North Ship*, published by the Fortune Press in 1945, was something of a false start. At least, this is the impression that Larkin himself gave, in his introduction to the second edition (where he uses the infamous phrase about the ‘Celtic fever’ discussed earlier on).

Larkin himself does not entirely disavow the Forties, instead writing: ‘It might be pleaded the war years were a bad time to start writing poetry, but in fact the principal poets of the day – Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas, Betjeman – were all speaking out loud and clear’.²⁹⁹ Larkin acknowledges that his was a ‘search for a style’ and blames it on ‘general immaturity’; and since he began writing seriously in 1938 when sixteen, he isn’t wrong to admit to adolescence. It’s interesting, though, to note how he defines his early work as ‘not one abandoned self but several’ – and locates these variously-served styles as based on first Auden, then Dylan Thomas, then Yeats (with Eliot, and ‘Prufrock’, perhaps, lurking in the background).³⁰⁰

Here we see a stylistic kinship to Prince, where Larkin (another marginalised, sexually ambiguous young person at Oxbridge in thrall to high modernism) early developed his own brand of eclectic style of all styles. This style, rather than simply being juvenile, is also a key strategic option emergent in the Forties, as the next step towards what arguably became the postmodern. Earlier, writing of the Fortune Press,

²⁹⁹ Philip Larkin, *The North Ship*, 3rd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 8.

³⁰⁰ Larkin, p. 8.

Larkin says that ‘I was on the same list as Dylan Thomas, Roy Fuller, Nicholas Moore and other luminaries’.³⁰¹ Given the later animosity that the Movement poets had for Thomas it is striking that Thomas is mentioned several times here, as late as 1965, and never, it should be added, with anything but apparent respect. Perhaps, by this time, the liminal stage was over when the younger poet needed to shake off, by force if necessary, the weight of his elders.

Indeed, Larkin’s *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* represents Thomas with nine poems.³⁰² Auden has sixteen; Yeats nineteen; Housman eight; and Empson six. Larkin seems to rate Thomas far higher than might be expected, and as well or better than many minor poets he was thought to admire more.

If one reads Larkin’s *North Ship* introduction ‘straight’, it appears these were his poems of that time, and that by the 1940s he was in thrall to Yeats’s style, until he ceased employing that style and became the poet of *The Less Deceived*. That is certainly the straightforward narrative maintained, and to some degree reaffirmed, by Tolley, who edits and introduces *Early Poems and Juvenilia*. This collection, of the two hundred and fifty poems Larkin wrote between 1938 and 1946 (when he was sixteen to twenty-four), purports to represent all the work he wrote and published before the ‘1950s Larkin’ emerges. This book recontextualises the poems from *The North Ship*, which are now seen to be a fraction of the work of that time; and presents the manuscript that Eliot at Faber rejected, in February 1948, *In the Grip of Light*.³⁰³ Tolley writes:

³⁰¹ Larkin, p. 8.

³⁰² *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*, ed. by Philip Larkin, 3rd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 466–76. Larkin gives Dylan Thomas ten pages – 1/60th of the entire canon he amasses. The poems selected are: ‘The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower’, ‘Especially when the October Wind’, ‘Light Breaks where No Sun Shines’, ‘The Countryman’s Return’, ‘The Tombstone Told when She Died’, ‘It Is the Sinners’ Dust-Tongued Bell Claps Me to Churches’, ‘A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London’, ‘Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night’ and ‘Fern Hill’. Several of these are lesser known poems that take up Hardy-esque themes beloved of Larkin himself (time, tombs, death), or poems about adolescence and desire. ‘A candle in the thighs’, indeed.

³⁰³ Stephen Regan, ‘In The Grip of Light: Larkin’s Poetry of the 1940s’ in *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, ed. by James Booth (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 121–129 (p. 121). There is a rich vein of study in reading the manuscripts that Eliot did not accept for publication during his tenure at Faber. This salon refusé represents a counter-canon to mid-century British poetry.

In the Grip of Light marks the end of an era both in style and in the attitude to poetic fluency: from then on the poems came less prolifically and, after 1949, were subject to more extensive drafting. Yet its vision is consonant with the vision of the later poetry.³⁰⁴

Poetic style cannot be measured by number of drafts (that simply measures poetic craft, or dissatisfaction, or obsession, or diligence, or any number of things); and if a poet's vision remains consonant from period x to period y, then there is likely to be some similarity in style. However, there must be some period confusion when a poet who locates their voice and vision in the 1940s can be described vehemently as follows: 'it is in the poetry of Philip Larkin that the spirit of the 1950s finds its most complete expression in English poetry'.³⁰⁵ Well, then, perhaps the 1950s spirit was also that of the 1940s too? Indeed, it is Anthony Thwaite, one of Larkin's closest readers, who states that, as of 1946, 'from now on the personality is an achieved and consistent one, each poem re-stating or adding another facet to what has gone before'.³⁰⁶

I would like to read a few of these poems, from the 1940s Larkin, against the grain of the narrative that Tolley and David Timms (and, later, Larkin himself) have advanced.³⁰⁷ This false narrative is that the early work was only a derivative style, and that the later work represents an authentic and better style. It is possible to question this narrative, as we have seen. A. Alvarez, in *Beyond All This Fiddle*, claims that 'his [Larkin's] style has developed not at all'.³⁰⁸

Timms argues contra Alvarez that 'of course there are changes in style and attitude in Larkin's poems, and not just the gross and radical difference we see between *The North Ship* and *The Less Deceived*'. For Timms, this is mainly a question of 'the particularity and concreteness of the later poems'.³⁰⁹ This is slightly odd, since the title poem, 'The North Ship', has some very concrete and visual images, as in 'clouds of snow' compared to the falling tangle of 'a girl's thick hair'. Hair ends the collection too, with poem 'XXXII', with its opening line 'Waiting for

³⁰⁴ A.T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and Its Development* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 44.

³⁰⁵ Alun R. Jones, 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Note on Transatlantic Culture', *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973-74), 139-52 (p. 141).

³⁰⁶ Anthony Thwaite, 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin', *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973-74), 41-58 (p. 49).

³⁰⁷ This is similar to the narrative offered for W.S. Graham, another 1940s poet often thought to have been unduly influenced, early on, by Dylan Thomas.

³⁰⁸ Alvarez, p. 68.

³⁰⁹ David Timms, "'Church Going" Revisited: "The Building" and the Notion of Development in Larkin's Poetry', *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973-74), 13-26 (pp. 14-15).

breakfast, while she brushed her hair’, a beautifully lucid line in iambic pentameter. Nor is the metaphor in ‘XXVI’ vague: ‘Time is the echo of an axe / Within a wood.’ In ‘XVI’ the poem ends with the simple and particular ‘Voices of girls with scarves around their heads’. In ‘XII’ we have ‘the Polish airgirl in the corner seat’. ‘VIII’ opens with the rather stark and evocative ‘In the field, two horses’. ‘IV, Dawn’ has Larkin in familiar territory, at dawn, pulling ‘the curtains back’. The first poem has the wonderful ‘Gull, grass and girl / In air, earth and bed’.³¹⁰

In short, *The North Ship* is an erotic suburban-pastoral collection, full of young girls, weather and feeling, but it is never gross; and is actually rather lyrical and light. Do critics actually read these much-despised early Larkin poems, so much as hang a bell around their necks like lepers? There is a sense of the young Larkin being a bit dreamy, and that is hard to shake – are they afraid he might become Shelley? For critic Edna Longley his is an ‘anti-rhetorical posture’, which would not sit well with his apparently youthful dalliance with Yeats and Dylan Thomas, supposed masters of rhetoric; though she rather confuses the story by admitting that ‘Larkin is also Yeatsian in his mastery of the big words’.³¹¹

Peter Ferguson has also noted the curious tendency to devalue the earlier Larkin poems, in his case expressing a positive interest in *XX Poems*, which was published in 1951, and which features 13 poems later to appear in *The Less Deceived* (all written in the 1940s).³¹² As Ferguson observes, Larkin took ‘[...] steps to discourage curiosity about the other poetic products of the years between *The North Ship* and that of *The Less Deceived*’.³¹³ Ferguson notes that these unfamiliar poems show that the development between collections was ‘far less abrupt’ than it is usually supposed to be.³¹⁴ In short, there is no great leap forward, from a Forties to a Fifties style.

Larkin’s style developed far less than he claimed, from the time he began writing until his death, if only in the sense that his main tropes, themes, obsessions and structural manner remained (with slight variations) relatively constant over time. Obviously, his later poems are better known, and benefit from an older poet’s greater experience of composition, life experience and editorial technique; nor is my point to

³¹⁰ Larkin, *The North Ship*, pp. 11–48.

³¹¹ Edna Longley, ‘Larkin, Edward Thomas and the Tradition’, *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973–74), 63–90 (p. 84).

³¹² Peter Ferguson, ‘Philip Larkin’s XX Poems: The Missing Link’, *Agenda*, 14 (1976), 53–65.

³¹³ Ferguson, p. 55.

³¹⁴ Ferguson, p. 57.

suggest that Larkin's oeuvre is stale or still-born. Every poem a poet writes alters that poet's individual 'tradition', however slightly (to paraphrase Eliot), reshaping their personal canon; poem speaks to poem, and, by definition, since a poet's oeuvre is always necessarily composed across time, a temporal accumulation of effects will give a sense of advance and change, when what it may simply indicate is the difference of variety, or the variousness of the relatively similar. As the single best-known example of a shift from the Forties Style to the Movement mode, the way Larkin's creative arc is read is significant.

I will now consider a few of Larkin's poems about 'girls' – the trope/symbol of the girl occurs throughout Larkin's work. I also want to read these girl poems in the light of Terry Castle's chapter on 'The Lesbianism of Philip Larkin', where it is plausibly suggested that Larkin more than just desired girls, he desired to become a girl himself, at least during this early period of his life.³¹⁵ As quoted in this chapter, Larkin wrote to Kingsley Amis in September of 1943 that 'Homosexuality has been replaced by lesbianism in my character at the moment – I don't know why.'³¹⁶ Presumably, by lesbianism, Larkin meant that he both desired girls and to be a girl, or at the very least his sexual fantasies related to girls and women, so to speak. If, according to Blake Morrison, his style would later be that of the Movement's, that is, 'straightforward', he and his style were anything but straight at the outset.³¹⁷

This more transsexual, transgressive aspect of Larkin, often linked to his lesbian short stories, was also a strong element in his novels (both titles involve girls: *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*); and in his poems, which often contained a sexually ambiguous message or intent. Also note other words that appear often in the early Larkin, especially 'endless', 'life' and 'work'. The diction of Larkin's poetry does not change as radically from his immature years to his Movement conversion as Tolley or Larkin might want us to think.

Indeed, Tolley's claim that '[i]n 1949, with the Drafting of "Deceptions" and "At Grass", a very different attitude to poetry and the craft of poetry finally emerged' seems hard to maintain, based on the very poems that Tolley so carefully assembles.

³¹⁵ Terry Castle, 'The Lesbianism of Philip Larkin', in *The Movement Reconsidered: Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*, ed. by Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp. 79–105.

³¹⁶ Castle in *The Movement Reconsidered*, p. 84.

³¹⁷ Blake Morrison, "'Still Going On, All of It": The Movement in the 1950s and the Movement Today', in *The Movement Reconsidered* (see Castle above), pp. 16–33 (p. 21).

Though he writes that ‘Larkin’s mature style and his mature manner of writing had arrived’ just as the 1950s did, I am convinced that one of Larkin’s truer strengths was his ongoing attachment to a deeper, if ever more subtly nuanced, ‘immature style’.³¹⁸

It is not my intention to suggest that Larkin’s 1940s poems are ‘as good’ as those from his more canonical three later collections, but instead to insist on a reading of his early poetry that does not immediately prejudge them on the basis of a required narrative of upward and steady improvement; the record is more problematic and interesting than that.

If anything, I would suggest that Larkin is very similar to Dylan Thomas in a number of respects that are rather suppressed by critics: both were fascinated by sexuality; both were concerned in their work with fertility and child-birth and the transformations that adult sexuality confers, though Larkin’s perspective was antithetical to Thomas’s in some ways here; both reused key words, images and ideas, as well as rhetorical turns of phrase, throughout their careers; and both wrote copious amounts of teenage poetry that they kept in notebooks that were a source of later inspiration throughout their life; both were poets of adolescence who never handled adult relationships very well.³¹⁹

Tolley argues that Larkin’s work underwent ‘years of change’ between 1946 and 1949, a period in which there was a ‘more marked change of orientation in the direction of a poetry that took its cue from the emotions evoked by experience, rather than from a romantic desire to create literature – a commitment to experience that was to remain a touchstone of Larkin’s poetic activity for the rest of his career’.³²⁰

It is not clear what this means, unless it is a restatement of the often-made claim for the Movement’s style of no-nonsense ‘empiricism’ – though the use of the word romantic as an oppositional term is confusing, since the Romantic poets, of course, urged a writing out of experience too. Indeed, as Motion and others have shown, Larkin’s poetry never became entirely based on his own experience – though there was a neo-confessional aspect to some of the poems – but was often rather based on a modernist interest in symbol and image.

³¹⁸ Philip Larkin, *Early Poems and Juvenilia*, ed. by A.T. Tolley (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. xxi.

³¹⁹ In light of the fact that Philip Larkin had no children, and often used images of fertility and fecundity, I wonder why no one has questioned whether he himself was able to have children?

³²⁰ Larkin, *Early Poems and Juvenilia*, p. xx.

If Tolley means that, until the later 1940s, Larkin was mostly writing ‘blatant imitations of Yeats’ and not engaging with his life, his experiences, or the sort of undeceived (and empirical) landscape we associate with the 1950s in his poems, well, I cannot agree. Indeed, Alan Ross, in his long pamphlet for the British Council, *Poetry 1945-1950* (which incidentally sees the year 1950 as ‘a natural halting place’ to contemplate modern poetry), in his chapter ‘Nostalgia and War’ makes it clear that the key emotions associated with the war years were ‘nostalgia, boredom, exhaustion’ and that ‘the prevailing feelings were therefore unromantic’;³²¹ from this (the horse’s mouth one could say, as he was a poet living through the period), it could be surmised that Larkin’s chief style, indeed, subjects – boredom, nostalgia, and a sense of loss, pitched in an unromantic tone, were very much Forties attitudes (one thinks here of the cynicism of *film noir*).

One of the mysteries of Larkin’s collation of the manuscript for *The North Ship* must remain why so many of the ‘good’ poems he had written by the time he came to ‘type it up on his father’s typewriter’ were left out, unless we can blame the dab hand of ‘F/Sgt Watkins, V’ – the book’s ‘kindest and almost only critic’.³²² All younger poets must recognise how their mentors offer their own taste with their advice (hard not to), and, yet, it is harder not to resist the temptation to take the advice anyway. If anything, Vernon Watkins, the friend of Dylan Thomas and expert on Yeats, would likely have been more under the influence of the high style they represented than even Larkin.

Had Philip Larkin published, in *The North Ship*, his poem ‘New Year Poem’ (written 31 December 1940), the history of 1940s and 1950s British poetry could be very different – if only because it would then be impossible to have claimed the Movement style as one from the 1950s – and it would clearly shatter the claim that there was an early and a late Larkin – instead of there simply being various Larkins, variously suppressed or presented.

‘New Year Poem’ is striking for being about experience, and the directly described reality of the time, and being very controlled without ever descending into Yeats territory. It is also remarkable for including many of the major Larkin tropes and themes, including desire, medicine and fear, as in these lines from the penultimate stanza: ‘Their aloof visions of delight, where Desire / And Fear work

³²¹ Alan Ross, *Poetry 1945-1950* (London: Longmans, 1948), p. 40.

³²² Larkin, *The North Ship*, p. 10.

hand-in-glove like medicals'.³²³The last stanza, however, contains four lines that could easily have appeared in *High Windows*, and any number of canonical Larkin poems that attempt to find a symbol to reflect the futility of life and the unstoppable flux and flow of temporality (one thinks especially of 'Days'):

Tomorrow in the offices the year on the stamps will be altered;
Tomorrow new diaries consulted, new calendars stand;
With such small adjustments life will again move forward
Implicating us all; and the voice of the living be heard:³²⁴

One can detect the Audenesque here. Despite being written by an eighteen-year-old Larkin, that the poems have so many of his 'later' concerns and aspects of voice already present is noteworthy. But that is the end of the poem, which, if anything, does move into more abstract territory, seeking a summation (as most of the canonical later Larkin poems do as well). What is even more notable is how the poem's opening two stanzas are rooted in 'experience' and quite empirical in nature:

The short afternoon ends, and the year is over;
Above trees at the end of the garden the sky is unchanged,
An endless sky; and the wet streets, as ever,
Between standing houses are empty and unchallenged.
From roads where men go home I walk apart
—The buses bearing their loads away from works,
Through the dusk the bicycles coming from home bricks —
There evening like a derelict lorry is alone and mute.

These houses are deserted, felt over smashed windows,
No milk on the step, a note pinned to the door
Telling of departure: only shadows
Move when in the day the sun is seen for an hour,
Yet to me this decaying landscape has its uses:
To make me remember, who am always inclined to forget,
That there is always a changing at the root,
And a real world in which time really passes.

³²³ Larkin, *Early Poems and Juvenilia*, p. 139.

³²⁴ Larkin, p. 140.

I understand how a reader might hear aspects of the Thomas ‘romanticism’ and emphasis of the natural cycle in the ‘always a changing at the root’, but it is surely difficult to offer a more emphatically Larkinesque credo than the last line of the second stanza: ‘And a real world in which time really passes’, if only because it has become something of a standard position that Larkin’s major themes are the empirical (real) world and the ever-changing provisionality of that existence (time, death) with all the poignancy and other emotions (love, desire, hope, boredom, fear) that implies.

I wish to underline the point that this poem – despite its jejune aspects (of which there are actually very few) – was composed at Christmas 1940, well before any of the official Movement moves of the 1950s. It is a Forties poem. As noted above, the diction is always ‘mature Larkin’ – and here I wish to stress that my intention is to problematise Larkin’s narrative trajectory, from immature to mature, and muddy the waters, hence the scare quotes – though apparently in ‘immature Larkin’s’ young body. The following words, key to this early poem, are also, it seems, key to many of the late, canonical poems too: ‘endless’; ‘roads’; ‘bicycles’; ‘departure’; and ‘always’.

But, more to the point, the strategy of the poem, in these lines, is to look clearly (with an undeceived eye) at the lonely aspects of twilight, and another day for people having to work at a serious time of year, establishing core Larkin concerns about duty, wasted hours, isolation, labour, and how time, measured out (yes, with coffee spoons) in terms of hours, days, and years, is the sum of some lives.

John Osborne has argued convincingly that Eliot’s impact on Larkin was great, and that ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ had a special resonance, often echoed across his poems, across his career.³²⁵ Osborne tends to cite the later texts, but, again, the Eliotic simile, in ‘New Year Poem’, of the ‘evening like a derelict lorry’ has especially strong echoes of the most famous etherised patient in poetry. But this poem is not a one-off.

In April of 1942, Larkin wrote ‘I Walk at Random through the Evening Park’, another poem that Watkins and Larkin left out of *The North Ship*, but which presents the Larkin ‘we all know and love’ – or rather, the Larkin of sex and girls, often, incorrectly, I would argue, assumed to be a ‘dirty old man phase’ that erupts in the

³²⁵ John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 57–63.

1970s, as revealed especially in *High Windows*. Young Larkin, too, was interested in such things. Consider the first two stanzas:

I walk at random through the evening park
The river flows, the tennis courts resound
The children loud upon the playground sing
And in stricter training for the sexual act
Girls and their soldiers pace between the trees.

I walk beneath the sunlit castle walls
The timbered street tilts beautifully down
To reach the taming moat where skiff and punt
Circle giggling from the waterfall
And a professor in the sunset rapes a flower.³²⁶

This poem, notwithstanding the historical contexts in which it arose (in which soldiers and girls were sexually active in wartime Britain), is most interesting for the poem's Wordsworth-like occasion of a poet walking at evening, and noticing natural beauty (river, trees, flowers) interrupted, even perverted, by the still-shocking (at least in terms of diction) rape of the flower, which cannot help but recall Larkin's infamous claim that deprivation was, for him, what daffodils were for Wordsworth. Perhaps, but it may be that girls were Larkin's rosebuds, instead; and his depression masked an anxiety about this.

Readers familiar with Larkin's oeuvre will know that the poem 'Deceptions' in *The Less Deceived* involves, controversially, a rape of a different order – but it is salutary to keep in mind that, as early as 1942, and while observing (with some degree of longing) the coupling of young men in uniform with young women, Larkin refers to an image of unexpected sexual violence against the natural order of things – war being a legitimate moment to be thinking of such terrors, arguably.³²⁷

In the first stanza, Larkin moves quickly from 'children loud upon the playground' to a parade ground with a twist, where 'stricter training for the sexual act' occurs, and, while I can see that sex may engender children, what is more likely being presented here is the transition from innocence to experience – a transition that Yeats, following Blake, found of interest, in poems such as 'Leda and the Swan',

³²⁶ Larkin, *Early Poems and Juvenilia*, p. 172.

³²⁷ Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived* (London: The Marvell Press, 1955), p. 37.

arguably the rape poem that Larkin was here thinking of – and a transition that Dylan Thomas altogether complicated, embedding immature, adolescent experience with sexuality from the get-go.

Larkin, no stranger to wordplay and punning, enjoyed this poem, no doubt, as the rather school-boyish, but no less obvious for that, double entendre of the line-break ‘skiff and punt / Circles’ contains a ‘k’ dangerously close to the ‘unt’ sound, reminding the ear of how close innocent words are, also, to more vulgar, or at least sexual, couplings. ‘Between the trees’ and also between the lines lies the word of stricter training unleashed.

The poem runs for another three stanzas, and offers a reading of yet another Thomas – Edward. The poem culminates in another common Larkin trope – the train journey – used to particularly memorable effect in his canonical ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ with the smutty uncle in amidst the brides and their white innocence. However, Edward Thomas – that scion of the ‘English line’ – was one of the first English poets to write poems that were profoundly connected to rail travel (Auden and Betjeman also furthered this line). I am thinking particularly of Edward Thomas’s poem, ‘Adlestrop’, with its famous ending with all the birds singing in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Larkin’s own version terminates in a train journey, so that it transpires that the poet is on the move, beginning his journey in the evening park, not, as it happens, as a romantic stroller, or even dandyish boulevardier, but instead as someone trying to catch their train home. But there is a catch, for as the poem’s speaker, enduring the ‘pitying curious glances of / The soldiers’, reaches the railway arch, what he does is ‘pause and shiver’. Though he cries ‘to travel south / With suitcase packed and one-way ticket punched’ he is denied the opportunity. Indeed, he never had a ticket, for adult or child, and is not engaged in the great wartime shunting to and fro of the men off to war, or home again.

The poem concerns the loss of status, a status never, in fact, achieved or acquired in the first place – a negation of a negation – a purely Larkin negation – for, as it were, Larkin is not far enough away to return, and therefore achieve, what he in fact imagines experiencing, in the exquisite final two lines: ‘Breathless to hear you shouted by the guard / And see your name slide painted into view.’ The ‘you’ here is the name of the town or village – home – announced by the train conductor, the guard, as the train pulls up to the welcome (and welcoming) station.

Appropriately – though only because the sexuality of the first few lines has prepared us for it – Larkin turns the phrasing of these last, sweet and deeply felt lyrical lines in such a way that they are underwritten by a deeply sexual subtext. For the way in which the poetic speaker is rendered ‘breathless’ by the guard’s ‘shout’, and the use of slide, occasions an erotic, even orgasmic reading. This sort of ending – in which Larkin ends on a real or subtly rendered ‘climax’ – reoccurs in ‘Deceptions’, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ (with the phallic rain shower) and in ‘High Windows’.

The trademark Larkin strategy, of startling the reader with a more vulgar or sexual image or phrase and ending on a purified, or transmuted, and supposedly ‘higher’ level of speech (and by implication, thought), is in this 1942 poem fully assayed by the younger poet. What it throws into relief, usefully, is how the endings of these poems need not be so pure as all that, and still ‘ghost’ within them the earlier carnality, now latent but pacified, post-coitus, curled up on the page.

CONCLUSION

British and American poetry of the last few decades has seen a working through of several competing visions of poetry. In the process, what was once called poetry became ‘poetries’, and greater emphasis was placed on something called ‘poetics’ by emerging poets. This emergence of a greater variety of choice and opinion did not, in fact, ‘heal’ the rifts brought about by the so-called ‘poetry wars’, but rather seemed to exacerbate them, emboldening those who wished to make more definite and often exclusionary claims. Therefore, as the twentieth century ended, it was possible to note a hardening of positions.

This is not the place for a history of such a struggle, though it is one that clearly has been ongoing for some time, if only to judge by the many books and articles on the subject. What is a development worth noting, however, is a growing impatience with these internecine critical debates among some practitioners. Subsequently, in the last few years, attempts have been made to suggest ‘hybrid’ styles, or fusions, of the competing, warring, modes and schools.³²⁸ In many ways, the Forties Style could have been used to help map this splicing – though in the main it has not yet been.

As we have seen in this thesis, the Forties Style has been read ungenerously by many significant poets and critics from the often opposed camps of the mainstream and experimental – rather than, as might have been expected, welcomed by both. Indeed, though a poet like F.T. Prince writes intelligent dramatic monologues no less ingenious or witty than those of Michael Donaghy, he has been ignored for fifty years by most mainstream practitioners. And, though many of the Forties poets are the native antecedents of a potential late modernist line, they have been neglected as not being serious enough by many poets and critics of the ‘other tradition’.

The poets who do appreciate the British Forties Style tend to be those comfortable with linguistic irony and panache, and a mid-Atlantic appreciation of the French and European influence on English and American poetry, from the Eliot-Empson and Whitman-Crane-Stevens line; poets who appreciate style as much as

³²⁸ Swenson and St. John, *American Hybrid*, p. xxi.

voice or the possibility of voice. Such poets tend to have in common an acknowledged appreciation of, and association with, the New York School of poetry.

In this way, the poetry of Nicholas Moore and F.T. Prince remains alive to some limited degree. Dylan Thomas has fewer direct disciples, though many non-professional fans (the so-called common reader; his work remains in print; films are made of his life). Thomas remains problematic for the English line that wishes to present a Protestant, puritanical, empirical face to the world, and it is only when he is read as a virtuoso of unconstrained verbal irony and rhetorical good humour that he is palatable to more sophisticated tastes. Thomas is a curious hybrid of Larkin's sexual obsessions, Prince's rhetorical flourishes, Moore's good-natured playfulness and Tiller's assumed wartime gravitas – that is, he is a formally ambiguous, complex poet, whose work, rather than being univocal and tediously homogenous, is outrageously heterodox in its textual display.

Tiller, the most strange of the Cairo and wartime poets, represents the ripest of the lyrical modernists in British poetry. His stylistic influence on the young Gunn and Hill seems obvious to me, and is suggestive of yet another way in which this Forties stylishness – in a way a return of the repressed aestheticism of Oscar Wilde's 1890s – continues to operate in the poetic practices of poets writing at the start of the twenty-first century.

It is to be hoped that, in reading the poems I have written and presented for the creative writing aspect of my dissertation, the various elements of this Forties stylishness, including verbal panache, emotionality, sincerity and irony intermingled, aestheticism, and an interest in Eros and the exotic, as well as a fondness for artificial and rhetorical strategies of expression, will be observed. At a deeper level, the personalism and 'personal myth' of the Forties has been explored, so that the poet of this collection, however stylistically multiple, has refused to entirely deny the self's suffering in this world. If the work exhibits, also, a latent confessionality, this is because life experience intruded as the work was composed. Learning from Tiller, I attempted to express the personal through 'personal myth' as he did when writing of his own sorrows and concerns in Cairo during World War II. The final spirit of the Forties, it seems to me, is that anything is possible in poetry if one wants to try it out. It is permissive, playful and full of potential. My own 'anthology style' revealed here is part of the ongoing accessing of this endlessly rich period, the Forties.

CREATIVE THESIS:

POEMS, October 2006–July 2011

The highest criticism is the record of one's own soul

– Oscar Wilde

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

– T.S. Eliot

*Then, swift behind the stage, my third disguise:
Hard-helmeted, and blind, and indolent,
Learned on bells and the behavior of grass,
The playboy with the famous instrument,
The spinster with an attic of old brass*

– Terence Tiller

NOTE ON THE POEMS

During the course of my doctoral research (autumn 2006 to summer 2011) some of the poems written for this study into the Forties Style were published in books or magazines, sometimes with different titles; they have since been redrafted in most cases. ‘The Serious Business’ and ‘Emperor’ appeared in *Winter Tennis* (Montreal: DC Books, 2007); ‘The Shelf’, “‘Send for the boys who do not care’”, ‘The Forties’, ‘An England’, “‘There Is In It’”, and ‘Fertility’ appeared in *Seaway: New and Selected Poems* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 2008); ‘Song In A Time of Inflation’, ‘New Theology’, ‘God has left us like a girl’, and ‘Canadian Fiction’ appeared in *Mainstream Love Hotel* (London: Tall-Lighthouse, 2009). ‘Slieve Donard’ appeared in *Poetry Review*. ‘Slieve Donard II’ and ‘Sonnet’ appeared in *Poetry (Chicago)*. “‘Somewhere the mimetic is having more fun than I am’” and ‘I Think of Delmore Schwartz, Beside My Sleeping Love’ appeared online at *Blackbox Manifold*. ‘My 43rd Year’ and ‘Start Again’ appeared in the online pamphlet, *The Awards Ceremony*, from *Silkworms Ink*. ‘When all my disappointments came at once’ appeared online at *Hand + Star*. “‘Down from St John’s Wood’”, ‘September’s End’, ‘The Polish Builders In Hammersmith’, ‘Near St Ives’ and ‘Amirs of the House of Rashid’ appeared online at *Molossus*, as part of their World Poetry Portfolio series. ‘Pont D’Avignon’ appeared online at *Peony Moon*. ‘Flying Bullet For You’ appeared online at *Ink Sweat & Tears*.

Part One: The Serious Business

The Serious Business

The serious business is the world's too-much-with-us;
The warming surface and the freezing-beneath fuss;
Cross-slat sunlight dazzles the upturned model's bum

In some studio in Ravenna, or Paradise, a grand sum
Of nada incorporated. I have been five times a day
On the carpet, and also defiled cartoons, to defray

My fear that God might have fled, not to be extradited.
Let me state baldly the fifty-year problem, excited:
The shallow end of the pool is where beauty exfoliates

But the deep is where one rises through various states
(How the water flows like the undone bride of Milton)
Bent out of shape but oxygenated for ultimate union

With the blood of the lamprey and the salve of the eel;
That is I wish to coil, then recoil, my Byzantine raw feels,
Adept at the slide, slip, slow-fast-slow thrum of ideation

Which approximates the empty condom, verse-creation;
Julia's liquefied plastic wrapping the soul-surge's pulse
Well knows a lapse-soon into superannuated what-else;

Should we barricade the fights, or splurge our corpuscles
On the trident of this maximum folly, life's hustle-bustle?
I call for transubstance, décorporation, being not-useless.

It's not a poem unless it's seen

It's not a machine unless home-grown.
It's not a phone unless it types by horse.
It's not a hearse unless you get out born.
It's not a greenhorn unless it blows.
It's not a rose if it smells like glass.
It's not a pass if you fail to kiss.
It's not a miss if you knock it out.
It's not a parka if it's sprayed on.
It's not a tan if you wash it off.
It's not a cough if you want it to be.
It's not a bee if it floats like a bag.
It's not a nag if there's no dream.
It's not a scream if you smile.
It's not a mile if seven leagues.
It's not cigs if you're running rings.
It's not a song if you speak.
It's not weak if it is song.
It's not wrong if you write it down.
It's not a clown if it won't mime.
It's not rhyme if you can't recall.
It's not small if it fits in your head.
It's not dead if it stands up to pee.
It's not me if you dream it instead.
It's not lead if gold in them hills.
It's not pills if you don't feel better.
It's not a sweater if a garter snake.
It's not cake if no ice cream.
It's not a beam if no deep mote.
It's not a quote without fingers.
It's not singers if they faked.
It's not a lake if no lady.
It's not shady if you start to blister.
It's not sister if no kid.
It's not id if you forget the ego.
It's not meagre if lots of plenty.
It's not mentis without compos.
It's not piss without the taking.
It's not making unless there's breaking.
It's not talking unless you listen.
It's not glisten unless light.
It's not sight unless a Milton.

On Reading Martin Mooney

It's climbed to, then taken down –
let's say it is a sun-fed sphere –
to tangle with an earthy palate –
but the orchard in which making occurs
is rare, and self-claimed –
no other hand can lift the ladder
or bring the body to the branch required.

No, it's often ignored,
how the act is squired
with great care, even a noble attention –
spoiled because some are stolen
effortlessly – by talent or conceit –
to counterfeit the seat of love
as that of reason
when, in or out of season, the labour
in the high yard where the fruit bestows
its gift is more difficult than thought.

To climb doesn't always yield
an abundant basket on its own;
still, plenty does happen –
a verbal or a tropic outcome –
from such an uplifting *despite*.

The Teetotaller's Song

The woman in Waitrose
Considering lamb, or,
On Marylebone, hurrying
In the cold first hours of February –
Each enticing met face
Reminds, not of pleasure
But of pleasure's final consequence –
An exhaustion, fine and judicious
As strong boys wrestling,
Shirts off, on August grass,
Neither yielding their bit of lawn,
Their held shadows poised,
As if deciding whether to break
Or forever remain intact, enclosed.

So I love the appreciation
Of an arm, a throat, a gloved
Hand, drinking the unreasoned source
Of this adulterous notice,
Alert to what is expected of the world,
England, unbound from January,
The ones on the street I do not stop,
Entice, embrace, and kiss –
Writing this in loving's stead,
Giddy as after being christened,
Lifted up, to the watered day,
My sober, spun, anguished forehead.

The Shelf

I had come to the place,
Where, hearing talk of it,
One thinks never to reach:
The past-clever home
For poets, when, inkhorn
Dry, their plain pure language
Has run out, like some
Battered car in Texas,
Miles and miles from gas,
Ironic in the midst of all
The diving pens into the soil,
Those upstart, down-turning
Peckers that dive for oil,
And dot the desert like a rash;
Judging by such an arid
Moonscape as a base to write,
One leans on the hood, chews
A 'pick and spits, to think
On all the vast wide space
Bequeathed to the mind,
To imagine as full of something
Else: the roaming creatures
That writing finds. A lodestone
Or lone star sort of state, depending –
But basically, blank as a cheque
From a friend who has up and died,
So you might scrawl in some line
Pretending to be them, to cash in,
But can't – your style your own
Or, following on Seneca, refined.
What died to make words ring?
I load my ore with outlandish
Clutter, not to bring the steer in
To brand, or land the walloping
Salmon to the shore, but to sing
A score that has no meaning other than
Artifice or authenticity: both begin
In someone (or automaton) pretending
To compose by laying words on end,
An endless track from sea to sea,
On which all industry and commerce
Depend. I don't claim to be Jesse
James, or the King James version, either,
Liable to halt the engine as it sails
Across the waves of prairie, to offload
The golden insight in the big black vault.
The fault is in the chug-chug procession

Of creation, which begins to cease,
Like biological conditions of the specimen;
Organic? Didn't mean to be, believe
In quite the reverse, creation less Darwinian,
The finger-zapped instanter blast of a God
Making all everything ever at once,
Which, when written (said) sounds false,
Perhaps the reason writing is dangerous:
By putting down the line one shows
Precisely the ignorance by which one knows
What isn't true or cannot be said, what
Thoughts, before they happened, were
Not even oozing from the oil of the head.
So there's the theme I haven't had:
Two summers since I tended to my Dad,
Dying, as all do, and how mourning fed
A kind of released grandeur from my tongue;
As when I wanted poetry, when young;
Now, having stopped my sorrow
As one does, in time, I have also found
No more reason to need to rhyme;
It is the ending of the need begins
The play – the spooling out of the spider's
Fibre strong as caution but light as day –
Enwebbed, one writes, or then is written on,
And nothing placed into the midst belongs
To evidence or witness stand – floats free –
Or hopes to, in sticky search of locking-in
The wriggling at the pit of poetry –
A smallest beast, to suck dry of its blood,
An ending better than the start is good.

The land I'd wish to describe

Contains beasts more delightful than art itself;
They curl about the foliage like smart imps
And pelt us both with bold fruit, chattering

Like those who prefer celebrity to the genuine.
Inside this jungle we'd come to a shelf
On which the heads of chieftains had lain;

Sacrificed, they fell like blossoms in a stream.
Touch the cold worn grooves of this ancient thing.
Here is how the savages anoint their king.

How fortunate we are to live elsewhere
Among a people always temperate and wise
Who have no systems able to boil their blood alive,

Who have no faith to make them bring down a knife.
Placid and good, our island is, unlike this place
Drawn for your pleasure; unable to spread

Or cause upheaval, really, in the vibrant world,
In which the riches that are wanted can be seen
And, as if at a market, sit on a table to be taken.

In Memory of F.T. Prince

'Because to love is terrible we prefer/The freedom of our crimes' – from an early published version of 'Soldiers Bathing', F.T. Prince, Captain, M.E.F. (British)

Desire ages, ages hardly at all,
Edges, like those of a book,
Curled at the beach, where waves,
Sent by the summer, brush

The salt away, finely-combed,
And it is homosexual love
That holds us in its palm,
That cuts and dries the hair

We both wore, like uniforms,
That day that was a decade,
Though neither of us found a bed
That could be so cleanly made;

For now, married, on continents
Split as if in some biblical debate,
We have shelved those dreamy
Acts of early indiscipline,

Where, cock from trousers,
Cock in hand, we edged, together
To a cliff, a Christian form
Of final decision, in the Italian sand,

But stepped away from intercourse,
Or love, decided that, as men,
Our hearts belonged to those
Who could tend it otherwise, and so,

Packed up our bathing suits,
And wore trim expressions
Home, at dawn, dressed, like wounds
More deeply in blood-lies.

Words have a purpose if no meaning
Beyond shorelines where they crash,
Which is to deface emotion
With communication, in a style

That drowns the jungle wholesale,
And no ark or personality can swim
Free of its deciding glamour
And deceptive fluidity: so smile,

And say, it was not love, that drove
Our Damascene caresses to a cross,
Upon which loss lay openly, but
Desire suffered in its private language –

No, it was decorum, or fear of
Impropriety – simply petty feeling,
Feeling inadequate to emotionality –
But those who nailed the arm of God

Into the wood were strong enough
To withstand hardier cruelty,
And played at the weeping feet,
Just as the artists, unknown mostly

Except for the names of school
Or master, too, commanded passion
To an ordering, pictorial and strange,
Of such derangements of the body

As we could never have drawn
From our quivers to disarrow, true –
So saying, even being, overcome
Is not the terrible action it appears –

No, it is the naïve aversion to it,
Slowly accruing to regret, by year,
That marks the one, who, like Cain,
Enters a town each time as someone

Immediately despised, narrow, pained,
Leaving the districts with stones
For signs the boys follow out with
On the path; love's release is betraying,

Even as it holds back confession
To end as a marble, certain epitaph.

'Send for the boys who do not care'

Send for the boys who do not care,
The rude birds that avoid the air,

The girls who shave off all their hair,
Flyers that crash down for a dare –

Send for the scribes who are impure.
Let them serve up sherbet and maize,

Warmest Florida days, a dance craze
Started in Harlem, and nothing in place,

See, there are no shoes to win this race –
Blessed are those who fail to justify

The ways in which they select high
And low manners of making desire sigh.

Mania belongs to the song of songs sung
With thrusters burning, all wheels swung

Wide to glide like butter or ice going across
A pan, out to sea which cannot adjudicate

Between a well-turned ankle and a sharp skate
But glistens like a flustered many-glozed affair.

A Covenant At Mary Le Bone

Language has depleted its resources
The choice is between languagery
Made of its own parts
And voices parted from
Any primary sources

This has been a time of flowering loss
Much plentiful death has grown here
This has been a rich and fruitful gash

I would like to ask for help
The men that threw the drugged men
From the aeroplane cared little
I hope someone can help

The men that plunged the weapon
Into the mother ignored her child
Can someone please help?

The men that began the conquest
Saw neither the cobra nor the orang-utan
You, up there?

The cones like labyrinths
The labyrinths like combs
The combs made from bees that hum with life

It is time to succumb to a desire for a purpose
This must be a candle made of three languages
One word to light, one word to burn, one word to sputter

The wick of the world gutters in starlight
Lucifer is a lion who feeds on a nest of gazelles,
Winged gazelles, and the lion is also winged

Lady, you opened your body to give us something vague
How do you taste rejection in this ulterior
Context, where all possibilities
Seem null and void.

By the supremely gifted singing of the Armani Zebra
Who earns more than you, but loves no one but nuclear antigens

.....

[continued on next page]

Lana
Hosanna

Lana Turner
Died of throat cancer

This wound is a rose that opens in April
Kiss the convoluted vulva of the cut
And climb the bridge of special words
As if meaning in this line was faintly heard

In the absence of authority
In the lacking of trust or greenery
In the sadness of repetition and homage

Get a crown of possible junk
Desire up a lantern or two mastodons
Inject in to this given world new versions

See in the sign a sky
Lit like an advertisement
Promising modification, income and excess

The sawdust crab mimics excellence
Its inhuman vaudeville a testament
To the blinded ingenuity of
The Mover of All Holocausts
The Mover of All Abortions

All intercourse is terribly commercial
Love Itself Is A Ledger Of Sales

Alone the provident and recurring motif, the sapling
Rejuvenates, without purpose, saving us
From having to derive meaning from Nature
In the adroit idiocy of its energetic fuckery
That brings the world to a reverberant conclusion
In leaves green as a pastoral eye or Antarctic icicles

.....

In sense, t, he returning and concluding force
Vibrant and jaded parallels, lush, zoological and surfeit
In the grotto where the shepherd kisses Lana's toes
Another child is born without fingers or – terribly –
Without a nation state. This child will hold things
With a fiery tongue and build nations from floes

[continued on next page]

This has been a time of flowering loss
Much plentiful death has grown here
This has been a rich and fruitful gash

Made of its own parts
And voices parted from
Any primary sources

This has been a time of flowering loss
Much plentiful death has grown here

Inject in to this given world new versions

I Think of Delmore Schwartz, Beside My Sleeping Love

Romantic, an American lyric
Pitched to Plato, past a sleeping blonde
By my side (Frisch's *Stiller* slipped

From her hand like a hypodermic) –
As birdsong types out a serious letter
Calling out for madness and History
To meet underground, spring's

Union in the grave, that breaks
When love's excess proves rhetoric
Can be poetry before it persuades.

Beauty read Freud and smoked cigarettes,
Was smart, milk came in bottles, those vessels
Rattled, and genocide was still
Locked in the razor of one ill heart.

The complex mode puts leaves on trees
And summer is a good idea of the mind
Long before ever it was experience –

For we imagine knowledge to be good
And sure, even though, as Eden's children
Mostly what we knew was unconfined –
Our syntax slipped away from land,

Our rocking beds sailed on moonlight
The frost of sky our beaconing horizon.
Awake ghost voyager now, who sank

In the unmoored mind's Mariana,
Unrafted, swollen with brain-rot,
Wracks of passion – unable to know friend
Or pirate in the shadow of shadow.

The sublime may call for clarity
But is often served by vague men who doom
Their jutting prows to strike odd reefs,

Unroofed by calm lingo and straighter goals.
Only in subtle bays or surface shoals
Do tides or pools destroy; not in desert rooms;
The gloom is the sea spray breaking in.

[continued on next page]

So were your self-made cuts to brow
Of mad projections (of madder maps) both slight
Surface and submarine profound too – sufficient

To render sinking thoughts and feelings
Mirroring out emotion, casting a beam to blind –
Blindness not bestowing wisdom but poison
To fog the clown, whose mask of white pain

Conveys words for pain as well; mascara on skin
That goes to the roots subcutaneous and beyond.
To die alone is to contain a sorrow blossoming

Before sane spring arrives, to know disorder
Thriving like a bulb bled in shaken ground,
Still the ground the only self that one can own,
So one's garden is infested with an early frost even

In the middle of a bright-seeming normal sun.
A renaissance as rain bows down the cherry tree,
As men cough in thin hallways before they frown

To click at keys that lead them on through frail doors
To places of walls, pale carpets and burns on floors
That speak of beige traffic, and fisticuffs in closets.
To fail is obscure – it means one first could win,

Be laurelled, in order to sink, like Satan; you did;
I see this unmastery fight itself off now in me.
Twilight like a courtier bows at the long glass pane;

The Queen of Night allows access to her pavilion.
O, high sensation and archaic claims of style!
The tree that latticed our bodies with light and shade
When we wake is not a metaphor or natural –

Spoken into greenery by this thrill of penmanship –
Spendthrift and untidy on a foolscap before sleep.
Your adoration has slackened on the bed

And yet by force of habit are we both read
On one page forever unioned by a line's crown.
Such a coronation of an abstract love is
Grandiose perfection of the written ring.

Hammersmith, May 2009

New Country

Declaring the flag, they flew
Across valleys, flinging shots
Like shouts, off stone ministries
Swelling to a nation in some streets;
Insolent crayons in bluster's fist –
Identities scrawled, blood-by-ink,
Each declaration, an equal foe
Not wanting to have heard it –
Lands are chastised, though, taken
Back to day one, then some, predawn.
Light is always violent expansion.

Song In A Time of Inflation

Only you, and money, and sunlight
Hold up any clear possibility,

And joy is not to be undervalued,
Is to be portfolio-carried, a fluid

Securitisation, to transfer one kind
Of happiness across to another form;

Words are only digital on a screen,
In one account or another

There's a vault holding all our hearts,
Our souls, our meanings.

Westerners are better than the others,
More perfectly formed, more joyous,

Handsome and wearing watches
Meant to be passed down father to son;

My plane lands at noon, cars speed
To collect us, your long smart legs

Slip out of the vehicle, onto the tarmac.
At the UN we trade tongues like critics

To hold some sort of pretty balance.
If we smile and agree, we are good;

If we frown and snarl, we are foreign.
However, we love to make love to women

Who are dressed in Paris, and address
Large forums. No lions roar

In the mountains anymore, they run
Riot, on goldleaf paws, among the City.

I want you; you do not know me
Since I am blacked out, a face speaking

On an interview in Dangerzone Three.
Green as the citadels are, clusters

[continued on next page]

Of eruption upset the lyric of promise,
Love comes lobbing lies like malaria

Shifts and shudders on a sweaty sheet,
Like desire to be posthumous writes

Words into the stream of any body.
Our fuel's costly, my jet's coming soon.

Vroom and clutch, swoon and dance –
It's sunny in host veins and currency

Urgently insists we all have a reason
To create offspring, to congregate here

In the sweet summer gardens of fear,
In fearsome gardens of sweet summer.

New Theology

Here is the god not believed in, and here.
Broken, as rain is set apart, unmade
in the way a bed never slept in is calm

when deep within it is a radiant pain.
A tree the wind caught and murdered,
the sea cast out of its cold home, onto

colder stone. Everywhere, the god
no one worships remains, split as
a boxer's lip – participating

in a sequence of things, the strain
to assemble meaning, or a world –
shifts on the tilted deck of desire.

Inch by inch, my god stretches out
clever as a lizard adroit on a white
afternoon wall, becoming the measure

of all dreams, all actions. Reason's
a jumping horse, whose slight rider
is also lifted over the waterways to soar.

Hedda Gabler

This white wide luxury
Like Venice green water
Lapping at sinking
Places where men
Planning voyages
Circled globe-painted
Floors, and nothing
Inside is good
And nothing outside is
Good enough
A bullet reflects, refracts,
Bloodies like blush,
What is the cosmetic
Gap or gape twixt
Trigger and kiss,
Red is a hole marked
Mind goes, mind is
A house on loan,
Blood banks on this,
Blood loses on less,
The supple market
Of my flesh is lively
In fashioned suits,
Unbuttoning to breastbone
Judges and scholars lick
Only skin, which is flat,
Cold and rips open,
Tears away, label as label,
Permitting anything,
Expressing what is owned;
This shot to me
Says me, says more or less
Beyond saying, says bye,
Says high, says beyond
The exposed sky, a bird
Crushes its brain on glass,
Perceiving what is clear
To be further emptiness
In which to extend wings,
Instead surface declines
To allow, holds, breaks,
And the crackhole shines
With multiple lines, born
From one finger
Saying Hi, saying Now,
Making the future
Spare study for nowhere.

The Forties

Of time, the whole shivering mess
Of inhalation, of Paris,

Of what lamplight may express
Best when extinguished, how

A distinguished man will dress
Only to undress a woman under

The eye of the moon,
Of mirrors, in the hall, the spare

Room and turned to walls, to see
The damp arabesques that Poe once

Urged on decorators everywhere,
In his *Philosophy of Furniture*.

That smell of books as good as honey
Or milk in tea, promising

A day swept clear of storms, though
Across the bay, a headland of cloud

Desires to break upon the sky
Like glass wants to step out

Of its mirror, to surprise and redraw
The angles of the day, a word's repose.

Rain rebreaks upon the windows
And the night begins its trains.

Michael Kohlhaas

after Kliest

First they starved my two black horses;
Then they beat my loyal stable hand
So that now he coughs up blood; he will
Never recover. That would have been enough
To test most good men. My faithful wife
Was struck in the chest on her way
To petition on my behalf. She died
Three days later at my side. That's when
I sold my home, my business, sent the children
Away, over the border, to be safe. I gathered
The few men who could be trusted,
Who knew me, knew I was a just employer.
They too thirsted for vengeance.

We arrived at his castle at night, killed
The first two men we met, quickly.
I whipped a stable boy within an inch
Of his life; we scoured the place. Wives
And children were pitched out of windows
Like so much excrement. Knights bowed
For forgiveness as if I were the Lord.
I was not the Lord of Mercy, this night.
We lopped heads off like children
Taking the flowers from a field. I waded
In blood, a man fording a shallow stream
To cut a journey short. I lost no man
And turned the Junker castle into a waste of stone,
A field that could not be ploughed. Now
His toll gate was just a dead tree cindered.
I taught these bastards what pain
Is, in the language they spoke.

That was only the beginning. Good murder
Is its own calling card. I nailed up warnings –
For the enemy I most wanted had fled
To a nunnery, to hide behind God's skirts.
I would have bloodied that white linen
But when we arrived, a hungry mob of thirteen
Killers with a cause, he was gone ahead,
To Wittenberg. Wittenberg should have prayed
That instead the Black Death had knocked
On their good gates. My men, unknown, blessed
Like cats on silent paws, brought unexpected flames
In the name of Kohlhaas in the night, nineteen

[stanza continued on next page]

Buildings gone, including a school, two churches.
I nailed up a new warning – give me the bastard.
He'd taken my horses, and my wife. He'd pay.

They did not relent. Second night and more men
Slipped in, fires like sores on a plague victim
Erupted, the whole town danced to the fire,
Trying to find enough water. Look in my eyes
For water. I had wept that ocean dry. Give me
My man. Not so. The third night, the town bells
Rang like every virgin married at once;
Dawn brought groom and bride to their ashen senses;
The timbers and foundations blistered.

What kind of world can men build for each other
If a good man who makes an effort is turned aside
Simply because of nepotism?
High places with no room for honest men encourage
Conversion to a new faith. Mine calls for heresy:
If they won't give me satisfaction, by Christ, I'll nail it out
Skull by skull myself. They sent two armies against me –
But my mob had grown to a hundred like a pestilence.
We took them as they sought to meet, interrupting
Their wedding night by slipping between their own force.
They wept at our love of murder. We knocked them down.

Now that got attention from Martin Luther.
He called me damned, said I should stop. That gave me
Pause. He was a good man, who spoke to our God.
So I dressed in new clothes, under cover of the night
Came to him then, unawares as he scrawled words
Against the Pope, his own war. I begged to confess
And receive the bread and blood of Christ. Luther's
Moral maidenhead resisted my simple thrusts,
I was turned back from that door. He vowed safe passage
If I'd demob. If the army of justice was just dispersed
They would come to control the situation again.

No strongman is more deadly than the disease of an idea
Incubated in the skulls of men, lice in the bed sheets.
Trusting the man, I left, broke the mob, took myself to Dresden
To seek fair repayment in the courts. Half the mob
Like a broken tooth festered in the mouth of the country,
Raped and burnt, a lingering faggot after the fire was out.
They blamed me, and court intrigue and the inherent evil
Of men who love their friends more than the truth,
Sentenced me to die. Not before the black horses, fed
Up to their original rude health, were brought before me.
As I was killed a crowd rushed forward to touch blood.
My good sons were knighted. Their bloodline runs on.

‘Somewhere the mimetic is having more fun than I am’

Somewhere the mimetic is having more fun than I am
Doing what is done when description windowdresses
The world in frontage, clear as snowdrops in a cup.
The work of enjoyment is outnumbered by confusion,

Or only the flagrant frost of cans & trousers, poles
For fishing, & other displayed tackle. Brought down,
The claim to see & say; this whirlpool is no hypnotist’s plot.
The vision on offer today is grim: brooding germs spoil

In July, but ladder in August to overbreed the solar lung;
Few will survive this transit, so flares beckon the ailing
To camps where sleeves are rolled up, injections slipped.
Now a medical universe is sharp as new-dabbed barns,

Clean as Christmas in white slapdashery. Hung up
By gloomy rafters an unworkable Farmer Brown fishes
For breath, unhooked becomes a clam. No speech acts
As well as a loop for a throat. Tie one on & plunge.

Taking this as morbid helps, as daily assists, as done.
Crisp despair & stylised anxiety won’t quite quip a virus
Off the surface. A cut describes its own revulsion in red
Ink, or is a body celebrating when it grins out, festooned?

Race to the poles, where answers are stacked in Quonsets,
Then radar back info-rubber to the chaps at HQ on wires.
Death was harpooned, refuses to blubber any further. Sung
Like that, these undefeated lyrics express strange happiness.

My 43rd Year

History presses like a wall
against our shy backs –
shall we take the floor,
now that nothing costs more
than it did in 1944, and dance?
Life is such that one has to go
in and out of doors of great hotels
to sleep on beds that later are remade
while all the bills get paid
by an invisible millionaire
for some, while others become maids
or valets until their skin goes grey.
The sun will return in the morning

to remind us that the night belongs
to priest and demon equally,
and after the eighteenth-floor leap
into the delicate unspeaking air,
the chauffeurs look the other way.
I was sad before, and may be later today.
You and I pump blood and adore
the time we were given to love
but sense, like tiny clocks that must wake
prime ministers to greet mountains,
our time is soon, and the falls send up spray
so that we cling more closely, less lonely
in the battery and indiscipline of the fray.

Seven Good Fridays

'Of love beyond desire, and so liberation' – T.S. Eliot, from 'Little Gidding'

I.

April takes vinegar once a year –
Easter I turned forty, gave up youth
And reckless afternoons endowed with darkness –

Being twenty is like being a millionaire
About to be ruined in a house of sweat and roses –
Shadowed by near loss (premature,

Incubated, my parents cradling my smallness
To cherish the weak miracle guarded by glass) –
I should have come in to the world in summer

Not shadowing the saviour like a blinking twin
Upstaging his unbroken promise on the skull
With a spring birth, small, infertile.

II.

Tongue taking what's distributed,
It is time to observe a silence
And in that silence rise and sing.

III.

The mystery of words
Is a moment of intensity
Carved in time with words.

Day, after a night of tumult
And no repose; I sleep to cry out,
Bothering the bed with recollections.

My father, eyes craving health.
Embrace him. I try to heal but
My hands come away from the body

Wet with blood and faeces. Balm
Cannot secure a corpse from time.
I will begin to deceive the surgeon,

[continued on next page]

Borrow his steel into the bargain,
And relieve paternal wounds, winding
Words. I will apply a salve, to save.

IV.

Caution is not the dancer's way
With music, or the porpoise
Commanding vast water. To obey
Form is to occupy all wings

Of its theatre – flowing space
Across the stage, a sort of flung bouquet –
Mastery requires indifference,
Less majesty, more rude straying –

Indulge in what one loves, one wants,
Whether it be old or new, in one's gift
To give or merely taken on loan –
Indulge at last in a thrown saying.

V.

We moved to priapic Budapest.
In Montreal, Sara had mounted

A bicycle one late evening
On boulevard St. Laurent – I followed

To Middle Europe, a wild card.
We were never lost among the ruins

We moved among, carried always
By the map of our selves, our shared

Aim to arrive safely, together, elsewhere.
We honeymooned on Hydra, island

Of laughter, but also bad dreams.
The accident offered our love

The quality of careful workmanship:
Hope is only as smart

As home is possible.
What is music but a scramble

[continued on next page]

For charmed time, a network
Of tintinnabulations made unfamiliar

In the sequenced air? A bumblebee
Will adumbrate, with élan, its fertile

Music, in a yellow field, upon
A family of ensunned flowers.

VI.

You laughed that winter, as I placed
A gargantuan toque upon your head,
Crowning you queen of the white snow.

Now, that snow is gone, is clear
As the water that dried off Ararat,
The world cleansed or differently bled.

VII.

Words sustain the body
By being a kind
Of mouth for the spirit –

Unable to die completely,
Thereby living again,
When the stone

Is turned away
With the reading,
Communicating, eye.

Part Two: God Has Left Us Like A Girl

God has left us like a girl

(after a line from Sidney Keyes)

She has gone, out of the house
and down the stairs, her scent
evident and sweet as lilacs,
shaping her descent in the air,
leaving us alone to pray
that tomorrow, again, she will
deign to, lightly, reappear.

An England

The air is active, intervening
And divisible. A girl passes.
Sorrow narrows and reduces
Whatever were the higher trespasses.
I've done some thinking lately.
Sun slowly passes a hand
Across vales and lakes here
And, momentarily, a look of grace
Descends. A thought drafts up,
Feeling like a soul might, if souls
Were allowed. Cars are parked
For large men to mark them.
I want so much to bunch the lamps
Together in the park, a bouquet.

'There is, in it'

There is, in it, something of the autumn,
Something of a lake bottom; a favour being
Returned, unopened. A letter burnt.

A lesson unlearnt. A muffled oar, risking
Silence for lifting through water. Numb
Fingers reconnecting knots. Women laying out

Fuel for themselves in a damp, starlit lot.
But what is mostly in it is what is not.
Stars as they turn into their unbright coldness,

Daughters as they slide still onto the ground;
Each unborn animal, each unstruck match,
Each ambush left before the riders enter

The narrow pass. The snake that forgot
To spend its tension spilling in tall grass.
Windows no stone decided needed breaking.

The high bedroom emptied of mourners, the king
Lifted out, recovered, only to slip and fall
Next morning, and so resume a smallness

On his own. The cold floors of parliaments
After the last to cross has gone and locked a door.
The pocketwatch she found, and wound

So that it said it was eleven all day round.
Its chain was golden, and it contrived a line
Across the rich lawn, gathering dew,

So that, on being brushed aside, it was rain.
A brain pivots on what is beyond it
Like lies hide around the corner from coming true.

Fertility

Bolts past, and past, and through names.
History seems young beside its fluent flame –
The rootless flower, the star without a start –
The reason for being early, or late,
The richest date, the opposite of zero,
The cognate's cognate, the king's bee,
The blackness of blackness being reversed,
The hero who sits up and laughs in the hearse;
The only manner in which death is cursed;
The stage on which all monkeys rehearse Lear;
The queer split shiver erupting ingots across
Time so bars of body and knowing solidify
To be born; it is the spliced film of things,
The jumpsuit, the steamboat's toot, the lute
That strings of numbers explode sideways into.
Without this fractious miracle, this intervention
No one, no mind, no skin, no lips, no eye, no one;
How the spill slip causeway goes against caution;
It outdoes eloquence, requires no passion.
Can there be such control in the spasm of the sea,
Such science in the lightning strike that crosses Z
With A, dashing across all letters, chromosome by
Chromosome, unzipping, sped by dot and hyphen,
So real it makes accidents of each, women, men,
Makes love sometimes a field of gold intention,
Waves of tousled, febrile, sweet information?
Its shadow is arctic nullity, the barren place
Where loss is chaste, and memory is not
Chased, across a tundra of insufficiency.
Not to be the fire but the water that shuts off fire;
Each body carrying a coin that turns on life or not;
Parenting or oblivion; to prosper or be forgotten.

When all my disappointments came at once

I greeted them as guests,
brought them in and settled their burdens
with footstools, olives and cool white wine.

This was a delicate stage –
they'd never met in one room before –
had circled warily in the past, strangers

to themselves if not to me (for I
had often expected, if not them,
others with equal claim on my time).

Now, none of my hospitality paid off
for they began to quarrel
over who would take my will to go on

first – each wanted to be the foremost cause
of my early failure to maintain a living.
Frames came off nails; books spilled; lights

fell like building blocks; stains spread.
During their intensity of competition
I took off over the garden wall, refreshed.

After riding the escalator back

to switch the watch
a Swatch a second time, a third,
each face scratched minutely,

or because the date was stuck
I became a traveller in the mall
forever unhappy with a purchase

but returning always unalone
brought there with my wife
who loves me and worries for

the sorrow that ticks away
inside the case of my self-schism
but that's not all

I go up and offer each broken
or semi-imperfect object to
the kindly merchant of watches

who resembles a small Paul Simon
which is smaller than you might
imagine possible, and while

outside there is London getting
Sunday under a darkening wing
inside it is the timelessness

of some brief caring act,
not entirely due to exchange of
money, and I am in love

and ruined in some parts of inner
workings, a cog that clicks
upon another toothed gear

stymied again, under the magnifying
glass, still unable to be pried free –
sorrow's just an hour by hour

journey, but in between, there are
seconds as good as before, pretty
good intervals to cling to you and me.

Canadian Fiction

This was the severe part
The canister aspect
And the rotunda shone,
Was sea-like in its movements,

So that her sailor beamed,
Was a beam, moving,
And the lighthouse element
Was perfected. Read on,

For story, if not pastoral,
Read on! Christ was
Not beheaded, the dancer
Desired the other torso,

So the first man died,
The proclaimer.
Epic contains cruelty,
Spans water. I grew up

Near a long river
Bringing vessels to grain,
Grain to the sea
And in motion achieved

Commerce; locks
Adjusted levels, men
Moved up and down,
Objects went through

Hours to arrive elsewhere
And children lined
The piers to wave them on;
And the dead are buried

In uncongratulated areas
Nearby, offhand, almost,
Offloaded, ignored
In the merriment of shipping

And bread; in the daylight
Least considered; the living,
Also, are unattended to,
Except at visible intervals,

[continued on next page]

And during intercourse,
Communion, and feeding times,
For all must acquaint
Themselves with nourishment,

With food for throat, for soul.
Often I regret ill-conceived
Projects, uncarried, still-born,
Never premature, never created,

Unmade novels; stories
Uncharactered – no meat added
To their lineaments, no curve
To their air, their architraves;

This failure is resonant of
Many loves looked away from,
The shipments delayed,
The bored tanned faces

Of the men leaning over
The rims of their boats,
Waving at children
They neither fathered or knew,

In the listless blue air
Of August, en route to Peru.
I knew teachers with moustaches
And white shirts, who slept

On Saturdays, crying
Among the grass and spiders,
Their scalps half-matted,
Whose parched lives

Ached in their village,
For some identity only art
Bestows, only critical writing
On art bestows, when description

Collects loneliness with praise,
Calls them in, and holds
Their abject purposes in stock,
Lines their days, like pockets,

With glowing praise,
With the waving, undulant,
By the vessel, as it rises,
Story by water-story,
Above the locks, into industry.

Azoospermia

In the late summer I saw my future.
Not gaudy, hardly mine,
Brought to me by a blunt test.
The trees were alert to the wind.
Parents threw their dismal joy
And busy disorder about
The streets. The park strained
At its collar, barked with playing;
The hours in my head abruptly
Stuck. Now I was sterile.
All my weird kids blinked out
UFOS off the radar –
In a moment that stayed around
Like an invasion long planned,
That held its breath, that froze
My bones to my mouth –
I tasted the invisible loss
Of hopes going out. Maudlin,
So private, but pain occurs
Even when the reason's sentimental.
I attempted profound respect
For nature. Nodded sagely
At my secret body's amazing failure.
Considered new identities –
A renewed gender. Freed
From the requirement to breed,
I momentarily thrilled at time,
Now heaped, big, before me –
No Daddy-wasting anymore –
I'd learn Chinese, particle physics –
Hard to be ordinary when rare –
Free from expecting anything –
I gave my wife the gift of nothing –
I planted autumn in our garden –
I put a small stone in the basin –
I placed black glass on our bed –
I laid us down on sand and turned
Away. I walked around, around
The streets here, radiating inexistence –
My name meant never-been – was-not –
I came bringing no warriors in the horse –
All those dumbly-wasted Trojans –
My fate a silly-sounding freak
Of a word – (not even one dead one!) –
Empty as a collection plate before communion.

Sonnet

No children;
Cold uncoils in the blood;
Science, true, not good
For you. So old,
Suddenly, or so young.
Lyric inside not to be sung.
Plug pulled, screen gone.
Sun out; mind
Bountiful, playing pain.
These are my children
In my head. Unbegotten.
This is to self-forget,
To have the future
Born forgotten.

Our children

Love has the power to undo
nothing, but like a refrain, returns
to that absence so often
it becomes a thing, a lake of fire

in which husband and wife
bathe when going to bed
and when rising in the morning
to the rooms of the lit dark house.

Slieve Donard

The sea and the hotel
are dull and plentiful
like time in hospital.
Guests from windows
read books on Mahler

then look down on waves
seriously grey, possibly
ruinous or deadly.
White as healed scars,
a sea sub-zero in style.

Long women in furs
stroll glamour along
the beach, thinking
of Charlie Chaplin
who stayed there once

as did Percy French
who preferred the Mourne
mountains slumping
to the water, to London's
gold-flecked streets,

its lips rose-tinted.
The sun, a film actor
in a suite, fails to make
an appearance on the scene.
The hidden horizon

is modern in its abstractions:
fog-within-fog, as light
flattens into a Prussian
afternoon – austere silence
slowly rising to the ledge

lapping hotel, sea, guest and sky
in sadness, a chill that feels
symbolic, that cries out
*look on birth and death
as equal ships passing*

[continued on next page]

out past gnashing rocks! –
ships lit to some distant passage
by a faint lighthouse
a comic smudge of hope
pressed like an insect

into the book of night.
Then, the lamps and beams
snap on, casting the place
into immaculate grandeur
on its ambiguous lawn – tight

by wild sea and high summit –
as a bald man gazes in the spa
out on a dark car park
sometimes bothered by a car
and Magda brings tea to a couple

come to the resort to mourn
their inability to conceive
even by acts of love.
Tall curtains are pulled.
The tide turns. The sky thickens.

On the Eve of Surgery

Because you had not died
 Or might not soon,
Though some time
 I bought flowers
Yellow, white, and yellow again

No other friend
 Became my life
As you did
And do
Childhood never ends
When two love as one
 Love born in spring
Or reborn

Eloquence is not natural
Or must be if it runs
Through the passions
 Despair to miss you
When you were here
Are here

I write this in two times
Two places, one
What I most hope for
Your living
The other what I most fear

These two worlds
Bring sorrow and sorrow's end
Together as a bouquet,
Stemming and flowering
Tears we all know

Require of us born-breaths
That first demand of air
 Air in which we suffer
And endure encompassing love

31 Richford Street, June, After Reading Goodland

The sadness of England.
The coming storm.
The exodus from Tesco.
The death by flu.
The disused factory.
The walk under the rail bridge.
The can of lager in the hand.
The silence of certain streets.
The man smoking by the nursery.
The internet in the video store.
The broken espresso machine.
The 11.30 Mass.
The sunbathers on the Green.
The uneven footing.
The broken pavement.
The methadone clinic.
The shelves outside the shop.
The closed inquiry.
The rain at five to six.
The word path.
The hot and cold.
The end of the class.
The poets of promise.
The ground floor flat.
The geraniums in the box.
The sense of an ending.
The slow growth for another year.
The fear of the impending.
The autumn after the summer.
The unsigned contract.
The request for information.
The loss of nerve.
The godfather agreement.
The leukaemia email.
The post on the floor.
The revolutions elsewhere.
The rubber band left untouched.
The locks on the door.
The friends over after dinner.
The bra being modelled.
The detector vans.
The five novels from Amazon.
The thunder.
The artificial night of a storm.
The brother's child.
The return to either/or.
The despair of small things.

'Down from St John's Wood'

Down from St John's Wood hospital
The sun allows the promenade
I undertake, foiling dark fear
That what resides within my body

Is soon to tear. The leaves are weak,
Unsettle and disappear. The day
Is a Tartuffe of weather: a face
Of gold that may say other things

Elsewhere; the old fact, under a counter
Lies a gun, a bat. The world
Is not just mansions and private security
Though that part is real and looks good;

Inside the perimeters we guard
An unidentifiable aspect like a name;
A pulse or compulsion to think as light;
A presence that flames, gutters, flames;

A soul or mind or intangible perforation.
This beyond-words-shade is all I speak,
Flings me to Maida Vale for a vacation,
A lessening, needed, to coronate

That part alluded to, which, compressed,
Thins out, beaten, to a leaf that breaks;
Snapped in the sway of emotionality,
A wavelike battering of the interior.

September 2009

September's End

Some weeks I walk in autumn in mentality.
It burns like a St. Lambert girl's red hair –
Bursts through curtains, sun-knife in air.
Though a golden thing is going, I am calm.
I keep calm, though the remaining trees
Are anxious to be broken, as strings
Untidily, colour going to the bank
To be cleaned – a totally empty bank:
Rivers of money spawn leaping drought.
All about is quantity, lush ownership
Tossed aside – we're haughty on a date
By a boy's side we had not fancied overly –
Only wanting attention's silly powers.
I am calm, if sad, to stroll hereabouts now.

The Polish Builders In Hammersmith

They arrive at seven,
Leave by evening's eight.
Behind walls that let in all sound, no sight,
They begin, ungodly, to rebuild a state

Of things described by the agent (estate) as *period*
But not, note, *charming*, or *quaint*.
Who knew it made such noise to repaint?
Now, hammers in Hammersmith

Ruin the next-door poise. It rains
Plaster, what divided parent from child
Destroyed, as if to unsettle delineations
And taboos. Builders are a riot

Paid for under the table, that stops
To smoke at eleven, and look out
At nothing much, but England, far
From home, a girl, or mother.

No use romanticising manual labour –
That's been done before, by states
Who got their walls knocked through
Without anyone being paid to grunt –

That wasn't work but love in eighty-nine –
But that's easy-Homeric, tangling history
Up with legends of decline or war.
I haven't wondered at their unsaid names –

We stand each on our doorways, anonymous,
Unspeaking the same words of ignorance.
I have no urge to show him the wife-in-wallet
Or explain the reason I'm so often at home –

Employed or freelance we stand alone
Enjoying June tea and this promised sun,
Because inside is darker, dustier and more about
What's been than what's to come.

One thumb's been smashed
And the bandage already blackened.
After they go for good, tools carried off as all they own
I know the silence, more than renovation

[continued on next page]

That ends affairs. Where else they'll go
Will likewise meet them with habitual muteness;
The English wall, new-coated, of chill smiles
That welcome with a clean lick of politest enmity.

Near St Ives

Upon the sand the lifeguard goes
To lift his flag (yellow and red)
And advance it closer to the dunes,
As a slow rush of tide idealises
The duty, makes its purpose real.

Watching the lone figure walking there
In the noon mist, the windsock's flare
Warning not to float upon the waves,
The loneliness of waiting to be useful saves
Each one of us from our given landscape,

Or the slimmest task. An hour later,
Above Porthkidney on the coastal path
To St Ives, the beige has been submerged;
The clean green water has moved in –
The flags gone and no bathers to protect;

As if crossing the Sahara to me, a mirage,
I hold the image of the red-dressed man,
Stooped under the billowing standard of his select
Role – to be present on an empty beach, lest
Even one soul find difficulty in water;

And such flags as fly to say a person's careful
With another's delight comforts my otherwise
Dubious mind; aftermath of loss
Resolves itself to chores of kindness
Along shores where light settles and enhances.

For Sara

My heart leapt like a fool
thinking to see you come to my door

as it capered gaily once before
that otherwise distant Yule

when all the flowers known
to man burst from your proffering

as I opened out to your windblown
dignity and felt the dumbness sing.

November 2009

Hope, Maida Vale

Purcell in the room,
December exterior to glass,
beyond the white radiator's coils
I watch the athletes floodlit
and also enjoy aspects of the park
more wintry and more dark.

Fell into summer gloom
lasted longer, wouldn't pass;
it came to be my work, but toils
of a sad kind; a bad toolkit
knocking at my soul. No spark.
Now vague singing, a bare lark.

Even as you are wrapped for a tomb
hope to see light running out of dark.

December 2009

Slieve Donard II

The suite on the side
facing away from the sea
is the suite with the fireplace
and two plasma-screen TVs.
Better luxury compensates
for lack of view. Before
the perpetual gas fire, stunned
as if into stone, entering

as you enter your Anne Bronte,
a world muted, chemically arranged,
I try renewal of a mind remade.
Mind is book is water is fire, all change.
Fear is the wake-up call at three,
too early for planes. Airport quiet.
Leave the hotel without baggage, fly
direct to Geneva. They await you there.

What occurs is only the turning of a page,
imagined for screen. Unseen is greater.
Is attested to, as we rise in Mass.
Water should be avoided by all those
who get into difficulty with ease, and cats.
Searching for the blackberry in the fur-lined
coat, I roam and ring, opening
a closet, from which tumbles a victim,

providing a fitting climax. Mrs. Pontifax
is staying across the hall. The glamour.
She is the Minister of Finance's daughter.
She sees the cold winter sea rise from her vantage.
Our age is blinded by celebrity, seeing
with the gilded orb of a bronze, dull god.
The domes of our room service cool
after we have slaked and fed. As you read

this becomes the first one written under the influence
of an anti-depressed self, whatever that is to be.
What is, is taken off a shelf, a remaining wrack
that half emerges from the brackish ruins of the year.
Will love reunite?
Will Ireland be solvent?
All nights, holiest, least holy,
be still, be silent.

Ireland, Christmas, 2009

The Safe Years

The safe years are behind us now,
So prepare for what will come to us
She said, and the wind
Blew sage brush and ash
Around our table, where
A woman with red lipstick
Served green tea – the room
Moved to another room,
Time became Augustinian,
Difficult, and rough-hewn,
Feeling emotional, as it would –
We have no way to exist after dying –
Fame or memory are only conceits –
The years advance, and decline as one –
As paddles raised to tell pilots to fly
Then drop down with the same arm –
And Seneca took his own life;
Kings wanted sons; wanted a line –
No lines supply the ones behind enemy
Lines – which is where all bodies are –
Yes, man and woman dining in the café,
You are fighting, not with each other,
Not, as you think, because of infertility,
Those fears and lost things, little dreams,
Fripperies that perform the shape of hoping
(We fumble about with little dreams
Of simple things, like baby showers,
Graduation gowns; arms flung to say Mom,
Dad) – you're fighting with the body itself,
With some mechanical decision made, as if
By accident, but rational no doubt,
Something genetic, some blockage, a
Clicking off or on of some chemistry
That means your plane will not land –
It started on a fine day, blown apart –
Your heart like a storm blows up from
A fine day, will go on over the desert,
Until it ceases, and you and your wife
Are buried together, childless, collected:
Calm in love's entire silence, entire end.

Capsule

The time capsule is buried under the playground
where none of the children who put it there
will ever find it. Already they've grown
and gone. Weeds occupy most of the rest of the park
open on both sides to streets warned
by yellow police boards about locking doors, burglaries.
Nearby, a man with blood across his shirt gestures
out to anyone, pressed by some unclear need;
a prescription to be filled. The ground is empty
where the filthy scratched mosaic lies,

promising to be exploded later, decades on; blue and red
tiles to be broken outwards, presumably,
as if after an earthquake or eruption. After such local damage
who will remain to peer in and lift the dull, light box
so distantly prepared – as if some ancient egg uncovered –
to crack the little seal and expose the quaint contents to air.
What did they think important? How can it matter now?
Just as real religion ossifies to small myth,
given enough years to mortify, these items shift –
have shifted – crumbling in meaning, more than shape,

like some house tilting at the base. Will an old child gasp or gape?
CDs, laptops, magazines with celebrities wedded –
bliss either too different to touch or simply the same
in glummer hues. Today, tens of years to go before this flat vault
gets knocked open, the silt and sulk
of expectant history is listless. Men with arm-ink out of prison
or a war storm past with lager in their fists, barking about the EU.
So much unimportance packed tightly into these borough's
inner streets. Window boxes wilt or feature dirt bearing nothing –
not even the stalks of a perennial; the drunk who rents the flat

the ledge goes with never planted anything at all.
Which raises an image: of the capsule rising
only to be found void, the gift packed in that last century mere emptiness
displaying nature's enemy – the box just another casket
to be used by any of those who bothered to turn up,
and attend, the squalid unveiling, the farce, of bearing time up
and out like clutter, to us, as if it could have a purpose
more good, less terrifying – educational, even edifying –
when what each standing person by the rip in the earth has learned,
from child to shaking age, is that what time carries across time is loss.

Part Three: Start Again

Start again

In a key of slow
Then again stop and go.
Are trees made of pianos
Or the other way?

March plays the bare bones
Like it was evening
In a dive, solo.
Beneath the poverty

A billionaire lies
Domiciled in the soil
And about to pay out glowing
Light and growth.

Recovery is what the ill
Try to do, and succeed
Or die. Health is a portfolio
We all want into.

I am putting these together
Not as if my life depended
On the assembly, that's bomb
Disposal. Or disassembly,

Critical. Wires cross
As leaves revive cool green
And April steps out
Into the sun after a year

On the town, run down, has-been.
Nothing cyclical gets lost:
Time spins and so is redeemed;
Spins because planetary, so

Laws define the poetic sense
That hope is eternal; poetry
Makes lawyers of us all.
I step forward knowing my foot

Slips as part of its patter,
Faster then slower, not always
A goer but ready for a tip or jot.
No longer hot toddy, I warm

[continued on next page]

To the idea of writing
As a second chance to fail.
The grandeur was always second-hand,
Beauty the accident in what we planned;

The birth of someone else's child
When your hallway has no pram.
Gutted is the direction we head in
Leaving traces of our loss behind –

A fish dragged across the water
On a line you'd miss until blind.
I felt loss when it left me
Saw what I had as it flew

Caught the train by jumping ship
And sailed for home in a caboose
Boxed my eagles with an iron glove
Glued love to my ears, loose but true.

After Terence Tiller

Spring at the Tropic of Cancer
Is not Spring in England.
The Arabian ocean is warm
As blood served in a bowl
While England's rain is cool.

Both Muscat and London swarm
With meaning for new lovers.
Old lovers make do with cold
In either hemisphere –
Fear in the water or on the sand
Is hope loosening hold of her hand.

Pont D'Avignon

This bridge a church broken
Like a baguette above a river god
Mad as wine makes a drinker
Put about like a lie by a miracle

Of lifting – by a demi-saint
With a penchant for hearing God.
I think the wind could throw children
To their wet slaughter if it tried.

So limited these railings – and the snub-nose
Of the thing just starts where stone stops –
A sloping blunt snap then just air –
As if answer to unanswered prayers –

Built to show where the dead go
When overburdened angels shrug them off.

I go out in my suit, too white for this weather

and feel as if I am walking on a cold April evening
when the moon is about, and moving the clouds
as childhood crowds in, brought to me by the air,
May air on this occasion, and so beautiful a colour;
I think of a question of poets, and readers now –
occasioned by this event (so slight, so full) –
are poets to be next-door types or strangers
brimful with what's out of the mind, unreal
or a tipping over of one then the other, sometimes
all of the above; are they (I mean myself here

to be honest) credible witnesses or better for trying
to inflate the picture? One wants zoo animals wild,
one wants the cage to be wide, one wants rain to fall
occasionally, only; one wants to have control of things
that are, being natural, less falcon and more storm –
some force can be tamed and brought lightly to an arm
and other slight motions of the air swarm to harm, bring
lightning that burns the barns and crazes the mares.

Straw singed by such currents may smoulder, ignite
later, as a memory can burn under the hay for years
before setting the street ablaze with recollection
of a Canadian walk on an ice-cold morning alone
when the dawn-blue clarity of the time burned
like breath; a dawn as near to dark as this London dusk;
to place trust in a poem that tells this story (untimely,
barely challenging or unusual) is to draw in to the hearth
and cup a warmth to the face, enjoying what burns kindling;

a mind can build a fire that never grew in a forest or was cut,
sledged down and quartered in a mill, haloed in its own dust;
the green yearning of this thought and then those that follow
has no precedence in any occurrence for another; rings hollow
or rings a dull bell or perhaps, fortunately, peels like Sunday –
depends on what sky one has walked away from home under
on a summer evening when the wind is just rising a bit
and there is a feeling both of June and September's chill
merged around the corner, and recurring, as water in an estuary
may swirl and forge a mesh of temperatures in its white making.

Amirs of the House of Rashid

Pull closed the tent and light the lamp;
Outside the sand is wild as time
And goes about the world as if at last
The maker at the first had been tamed

By a later, lesser, angrier blast –
And now, brought low before the lowest
Was found unworthy by its own creation
And sent out to a crowd to be torn apart.

The heart of the night is terrified –
Only this thin flap, these cords, hold
A whirling torment of wind at bay
So we two might sit here in this calm

To drink of the bean and bow, to say
Old truths in tender new ways, beside
The Book of Prophecies we have by heart –
Written into the silk threads of our souls.

For each student of the night is dressed
In robes lined with deeper light,
Tailored with a fearless hand a thousandfold
More assured than ours, which, when it sews,

Pricks skin to bleed or is too narrow, tight
Or loose with pulling all the fabric right.
So: against this rabble of the outer storm
Here in my paradise-cell, too warm or dim

To serve as any model to fit a heaven on
What brings you in across twelve dunes my son –
Water-drained, fig-denied, burnt of the sun?
You come to declare a war or fend off

A question or request, to pronounce a law
Or buy a wife or camel or claim new powers –
Or perhaps to take a cup in silence an hour
With your uncle who has lately lost a brother

To share in this threatened space remembrance
Of your unwise, heady father, who led
His groundless campaign against that tribe
Had done us no harm nor intended any.

[continued on next page]

All sweet injuries imagined were repaid
With bitter blows in a desert flood
Of curved swords raining from riders.
Nod, be quiet, hold out your hand. See,

The lines that move on your palm do so alone.
Your caravan has broken and been lost.
Singular, you struggle to locate a line,
To stumble across a holy furnace to a well.

Drink of your heart, though its pain
Not be balm. Cool your mind's sword, until
It be sheathed. Be regained. At home.
Be at home in your emotions, guided back

Safely, to open that first book we each carry within –
Printed, as I said, with love, not desire
Or madness for revenge. I grant you your peace
For you to fully command. Your companions will have

Rest and time here for the coming days
Until this mindful air has blown itself out.
Then, go back to your people and claim defeat.
For me, it is time to see the clean stars. Wrapped

With care, staying in a modest position
I can withstand the eternal moment's rage
For enough of loud war in an hour's tumult
To make this best journey to be starlit, blessed.

My Tailored Suit Shall Be

Ready in an hour; invisibly mended
With costly thread and needle
By Larry hailing from the East End
Whose wife Eunice is a tad ill;
He gives her honey in Chinese tea.
He'll talk my ear off and sell me
Some tweed coats warm as beer
My wife will holler I don't need;
When I coast down the High Street
My feet will dance like on the telly
And heads will bend off to see
A Beau of style, the empire of taste
Brilliantly, unwisely, defended;
For beauty entails a dash of waste.

The Gramophone

Go
 the cherry blossoms)
 Next year, will you
enter the adjacent gardens
 April
or be gone?

No answers but in spring
(no death but out of season)
 Descending into
summer, Inferno:
 lovers, broken
 a wheel carrying language

See, it turns
 Fortuna)

 The wedding party paused
 for ices

One laughing jackal (editor)
LIFTING, AS A BRANCH
rain, its angels, bringing apart
 Heaven
at the first moment, the mover
not light, but words
 going,
 emotional

Feeling into extension
 old forms
unrolled for a picnic
 the tree wildly
prepared to feel
the ant bearing a pip
 torn from the lemon

 Out of nothing
is August, then
 unpublishing trees
(the fall's poems
 forgotten underfoot

Paddington Recreation Grounds

Boys on their field lit like an aquarium
sad to not be alight, like them, with goals
that a foot or hand can win; poetry's rules
no less old than theirs, but poets
are not only players on green grass, night
and day, also the old-eyed others
edged in the park, who nod at each leap in air,
each attained yelp and elbowed throw,
the muscular panoply of bodied action
folded into hours with an end; slow to
leave, friendless, they once stood on the line,
or blew as referee, their bones now cold
and all trophies pawned. So poems both play

and hold, gravely, as if a mourner stood,
one self under the hood of the ground, the other,
above, head bowed, to pray. We stand and lie,
this way, to make the words hit home.
So ball and word fly untrue until a hand undoes
the flight by taking it down from abstract
to real motion, feeling out the meaning of its gut,
impacted with the lob's sorrow-start,
the needing thrower's heart, which is to gain
the art's accolades, not be cheered in dismal
parades that sow ribbons on winners,
and never lift the anguished fade that flows
across the dark, onto playing grounds.

Glasco In Quebec (Huysmans In France, Brummell In England)

A pastoral, obscure dandy
Observes the barns decay
As if an aging roué
With the ladies of his parish.

The wood is blond skin, Sapphic,
The fields of hay grand streets,
The locals in their carts
To market, jaunty toffs

Bowing to all the prettiness
Their rutted courting meets;
The rows of tools, sparkling scythes
Are canes made of the finest stuff;

The farm's sunburnt dust motes
Setting off the nose like good snuff;
The daughters to their waist in grain
Are dancers for a grinning queen

Who demands they begin again.
These provincial details
He disciplined with classical romance,
A young buck from Paris back

From hanging out that took
Half his chest away.
Rich slow sanatoriums
Bought with ancestral bonds, language

Wilder than childhood's golden pear trees
Allowed notebooks to accrue;
A growing account; and a lung's
Complicated tug – – coughing up

Green that desire brings.
Style kept him sane.
Style exposed his lack -
His luck to beach south of Montreal

In pairs of three, even so
Acquiring like a servant or opinion
A quaint normalcy that ran
Seasonal as farming, as

[continued on next page]

Eternally tough, basic.
Released from artifice,
Whipped into being finally natural,
Or, it may be, infamous, a bit rough.

Emperor

(after *Solntse*, directed by Aleksandr Sokurov)

I.

I, Hirohito, among strewn boxes
and a fractured aquarium, compose
a poem based on a cherry blossom

and a dissected crab's revealed softness
as purebred goldfish on the lab's floor
strain for filtered water, 'Sea in a Glass'.

The Imperial lab floods with sunlight,
burning the eyes of rare porcupine fish
pried from their reefs for my further study.

Is it hot ash, or snow, progressing calmly
outside my blinded window, placing fire
on the flayed skin of this season's face?

I was a God in fancy human dress,
selected a fine top hat from London.
Forgetting my station, not minding where

I step, or what is stepped on beneath me
(a white, scuttling spider crab maybe) –
MacArthur floating on Tokyo Bay

I removed my divinity like a glove;
Petals away from a Chrysanthemum Throne.
The cold instruments of surrender signed –

a document to be skinned of whatever
fabric mere holiness is made up from,
I now stand before my smallest mirror

to observe ordinary nakedness.
Here is my entirely mortal hand
that may close upon a sea urchin's spines

to suffer the same pins and needles as
any human in the land. No longer
will trembling men button up linen shirts

or kneel in my bunker to explain how
a superior force borrowed the sun,
laying waste to our ancient paper towns.

[continued on next page]

2.

Today feels as much like winter as when
my father, Emperor before me, seeing
Northern Lights, impossible above Tokyo,

summoned me through four ministers
to speak of the sky's bright coruscations.
I have had to endure the long time

in which my wife and children lived
as if I were destroyed, under bombardment –
knowing their mourning as my own.

I missed the appointed afternoons,
when advisors would escort them to me,
so that I might present them long letters,

or read aloud from a masterful composition;
amateur of all, polyglot, ichthyologist,
I know the hours divided against us alleviate

our souls, make us speak new ways.
The sea forever inspires meditation
in peacemaker and noble warrior alike.

I measured my divinity in ocean-study,
so as to know, like common people who adore
the great ruler floating far above them,

each pulsing complexity under
the surface of alarmed, tentative waves
that always tremble like an organism

shocked or rattled by a sudden change.
I have looked at photographs of film stars also,
and felt great sadness for all living things

that move, to experience the minutiae of the day,
in a rock pool, which a greater eye envisions.
This much I learned from marine biology:

each way we mourn or find a motion
is determined by a higher instrumentality;
as if all creatures were forever in a bomber's sights.

Our bodies are examined by light's callipers, then
let drop, as if caught for momentary pleasure,
into the sea, which abandons, recalls, lifts and is.

The Port Daniel House

Baie des Chaleurs. But not.
To go in was to be quick about it.
The wood of the house haunted,
settling, peg-leg, as we slept.
Falling into the sea, cut palms;
took communion on criss-crosses.
Thirteen hours home by train
in a stolen cassock, bible studying.
So long ago. Isn't anywhere;
fires a grandmother adjusted in the grate.
Of the faces lit there, many late.
Glow of the time. Settling wood.
Wind sound and a Seahouse, slipping.
All of it, none of it, come to good.

Green Swifts

There are birds.
And then there are birds.
Elsewhere, plumage falls,
Flocks rise. Instinct,
Energy. There may be
A fifth force at heart
Of all this green nonsense;
The glass eye follows us.
There are words.
And then there are words.
Stuffed or on the wing.

Water in a Lakeland Vale

White water white water
Running out like a daughter

Like a son onto green grass
Gray stone white water

Across across down down
Water comes to shift expand

Undoing the mountain
Bending down as it goes

What's spoken is spackled
What's shifted is on show

Flying Bullet For You

Leap lightly now,
Leap darkly,
The train throws

Its classic conversation
With England, here
Across the rain;

And skies like lead
Make judges plead
For some sun. See,

It's begun – the journey
By day, lit by
A little horizon,

Mostly what's gone before;
Hand over your
Ticket, friend –

And bend, sway, as over
The rolling land
Your carriage says

What it feels to go
Through a country
Plain as night,

Clear as clay;
Not ever talking,
Never stopping,

But disrupted, mind,
Bit by bit, O,
For being so happily at play.

Jean Talon, Intendant of New France, To the King (1666)

Majesty, may this arrive, after months of turmoil
Carried by vassals chafed by violence yet calm
As their tilting little world of wood falls to rise
Bearing them like a nation on uneven histories
Of current and wave, spume and leviathan,
Astounded by dolphin and shark, salt-burnt and wise,
And find you smooth, perfumed, without grief
Or indigestion: vigorous among your scented court.

I write as chief Seigneur, your ever-loyal habitant,
Petitioning for a thing smaller than a flea in rice
Or a bead of sweat amid the corn. August is here,
Chill oblivion of unenviable winter barely run off
So now is the time of white-hot riot and gold growth.
Your lands on the South Shore are pitilessly pelted
With sun that might be melted ingots thrown down
As from the walls of a horde-besieged Avignon

Upon my bald and chapped skull, leather-clad, a ball
The indecently feathered savages might kick for fun.
It is hot – this land runs to extremes like a slattern
On Calvados; we cannot control our slap-happy men
Who have no time to sow seeds not of their own making,
Who would rather gallivant in the scrub and hunt beaver.
I have ten thousand acres of rich fertile land by a river
Wilder, wider and more supreme than the Ganges –

And no one to plant a bean or rip a carrot from the soil.
Majesty, with all my sprightly genius to serve and toil
Yet I am incapable as one mere mortal (though blessed)
To do what must be done, and flourish in this upheaval
Of weather, murder, and sadly-ignorant oblivion, Quebec.
Implore is too weak an expression for what follows –
We need farmers, not rat-trappers, rascalions, thugs,
Bird-stranglers, or jugglers. We need good wives

To come like sweet blessings in this hazardous limbo,
That feels daily as if there were no Christ, no Laws –
To lie with us in the nights, help us recall the words
We once spoke lightly in our cities and towns
In the human climate of our birthplace. Dispatch ships
Immediately, if you will, otherwise, I shall observe
In a year's turn of the wheel a thousand acres
First of helpless snow then meaningless grass.

APPENDIX. CHRONOLOGY: THE LONG FORTIES

YEAR	HISTORY	CULTURE	POETRY
1938	Neville Chamberlain makes deal with Germany	International Surrealist Exhibition, Paris	<i>Understanding Poetry</i> (Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren); <i>Enemies of Promise</i> (Cyril Connolly); <i>Poems</i> (F.T. Prince); <i>In Dreams Begin Responsibilities</i> (Delmore Schwartz)
1939	World War II begins	Ford Madox Ford dies; Sigmund Freud dies; W.B. Yeats dies	<i>Finnegans Wake</i> (James Joyce); <i>Autumn Journal</i> (Louis MacNeice)
1940	Battle of Britain; Blitz begins; Coventry bombing	<i>Horizon Magazine</i> founded by Cyril Connolly; F. Scott Fitzgerald dies; Walter Benjamin dies	<i>Another Time</i> (W.H. Auden); <i>The New Apocalypse anthology</i> (edited by J.F. Hendry)
1941	Pearl Harbor; America joins war; Trotsky assassinated in Mexico	<i>Citizen Kane</i> by Orson Welles; Virginia Woolf dies; James Joyce dies	<i>Poems</i> (Terence Tiller)
1942	Singapore falls to the Japanese; <i>The Beveridge Report</i>	<i>Casablanca</i> by Michael Curtiz; Henry Reed's 'Naming of Parts' published while he is based at Bletchley Park	<i>Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction</i> (Wallace Stevens)
1943	RAF raids on Hamburg; dam-busters incident	<i>Oklahoma!</i> by Rogers and Hammerstein	<i>Selected Poems</i> (Keith Douglas); <i>The Inward Animal</i> (Terence Tiller)

1944	Butler Education Bill; D-Day landings	Keith Douglas dies	<i>Four Quartets</i> (T.S. Eliot); <i>The Walls Do Not Fall</i> (H.D.); <i>Poems</i> (Lynette Roberts)
1945	Belsen concentration camp liberated; VE Day; Labour wins British general election; Atomic bombs dropped on Japan; VJ Day – end of World War II; UN founded	Arthur Symons dies; Paul Valery dies	<i>The North Ship</i> (Philip Larkin)
1946	Churchill declares ‘The Iron Curtain’	Ezra Pound committed to St Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, DC	<i>Lord Weary’s Castle</i> (Robert Lowell); <i>Death and Entrances</i> (Dylan Thomas)
1947	Severe cold weather and fuel crisis in Britain; India and Pakistan gain independence	<i>The Lady from Shanghai</i> by Orson Welles; <i>Passport to Pimlico</i> by Henry Cornelius; Action Painting begins with Jackson Pollock	<i>Unarm, Eros</i> (Terence Tiller); <i>The Stones of Cain</i> (Edith Sitwell)
1948	Bread rationing ends in Britain; Gandhi is assassinated; <i>The Empire Windrush</i> docks; NHS founded in Britain	<i>The Red Shoes</i> by Powell and Pressburger; T.S. Eliot wins Nobel Prize for Literature	<i>The Age of Anxiety</i> (W.H. Auden); <i>The White Goddess</i> (Robert Graves); <i>The Rocking Chair and Other Poems</i> (A.M. Klein); <i>The Pisan Cantos</i> (Ezra Pound)
1949	Britain recognises state of Israel; NATO formed; Republic of Eire formed	John Cage’s ‘Lecture on Nothing’; <i>The Third Man</i> by Carol Reed; <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> (George Orwell)	<i>The White Threshold</i> (W.S. Graham)

1950	British troops sent to Korea; McCarthy trials in America		<i>A Vagrant, and Other Poems</i> (David Gascoyne); <i>Recollections of the Gala: Selected Poems 1943–1948</i> (Nicholas Moore); Chares Olson's 'projective Verse'
1951	Conservatives win British general election; Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean defect to Soviet Union	Festival of Britain held in London	<i>Collected Poems</i> (Keith Douglas); <i>Gods With Stainless Ears</i> (Lynette Roberts)
1952	Elizabeth II accedes the British throne after the death of George VII; Mau Mau uprising in Kenya	<i>En Attendant Godot</i> by Samuel Beckett premieres; <i>The Crucible</i> by Arthur Miller; <i>Stand</i> magazine founded by Jon Silkin	<i>The Anathemata</i> (David Jones)
1953	Coronation of Elizabeth II; Mount Everest climbed by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary; USSR explodes H-Bomb; Stalin dies	<i>Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot</i> by Jacques Tati; Dylan Thomas dies; Marilyn Monroe appears in <i>Playboy</i> ; <i>Casino Royale</i> (Ian Fleming)	
1954	End of food rationing in Britain; Roger Bannister runs the four minute mile	<i>Rear Window</i> by Hitchcock; <i>On the Waterfront</i> by Eli Kazan; <i>London Magazine</i> founded by John Lehmann; <i>Lucky Jim</i> (Kingsley Amis); <i>Lord of the Flies</i> (William Golding)	<i>Fighting Terms</i> (Thom Gunn); <i>Soldiers Bathing</i> (F.T. Prince); <i>The Italian Element in Milton's Verse</i> (F.T. Prince)

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