

Andrew Duncan, *Savage Survivals: amid modern suavity*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2006. 116pp. \$15

This is the first chapter of an unfolding critical novella on current British poetry, to be entitled Corroded by Symbolysme: An Anti-Review of Twelve British Poets, Which Is Also to Be a True Account of Dark and Mysterious Events Surrounding a Famous Poem Supposedly Written by Frank O'Hara. The next three chapters will appear, in serial fashion, in subsequent issues of Chicago Review.

In 2004, I was invited by the brilliant poet, critic, and curator Kevin Nolan to attend the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, in Cambridge, England. I was asked to read my poetry and to present on a panel responding to Andrew Duncan's new and controversial critical book, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*. I'd never been to Cambridge before, and I was flattered to be asked, so I of course wrote back, "Sure, I'd be delighted to, thank you very much." But as the time drew nigh, I became somewhat anxious about speaking on this panel, for I knew, truthum be told, very little about the British scene of the past thirty-five years or so. I mean, I had a modest vista of the landscape in my head, was familiar with some of the work of the key forerunners, like Bunting, Jones, MacDiarmid, and the big names who had followed, like J.H. Prynne, Allen Fisher, Roy Fisher, Tom Raworth, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Maggie O'Sullivan, Barry MacSweeney, Tom Pickard, etc. And I knew a little somethynge about the British Poetry Revival and its tragicomic, somewhat mock-heroic battles, led by avenging angels like Eric Mottram and Bob Cobbing, and so on, and that its enemies were the evil figures Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn (sort of), etc., and later, during the 70s, soft-surrealist types like Craig Raine, etc., and that Ted Hughes hovered there, a kind of ghost in Purgatory no one seemed to want to talk about. I mean, I've done a little reading, and I know that I know more than most us poets about it, even if less than some others... But really, what right did I have as a somewhat obscure and eccentric Yank poet, to speake to Andrew Duncan's arcanelly detailed critycal epic?

Well, anyway, I went to England and I sat down at the table there, in the auditorium at Trinity College, and Tony Frazer, the fine translator and editor of Shearsman Books was the moderator, and it's terrible and I'm embarrassed to say so, but I can't now remember the names of the three superbly smart English poet-critics on the panel with me, probably an after-effect of the insecuritie that beset me. I'm not sure why, but I can't even remember now what it was that I said, though I have the pleasant memorie of making a joke

about how there seemed to be such agonism on the British poetry scene, as opposed to the US poetry scene, where everyone more or less leaves each other alone and gets along, and how Andrew Duncan, sitting somewhat diffidently, very handsomely, in the audience there, in a black sweater and blue shirt, laughed with delight, as did everyone else, including Peter Riley, Geraldine Monk, Alan Halsey, David Bromige, Joan Retallack, Forrest Gander, and some poets from Belgium, France, The Netherlands, and Austria, if I remember correctly, and this made me feel really good and gave me confidence, and in the end I was rather pleased with my presentation.

But to get to my point: When *Chicago Review* asked me to write a review of some recent books by British poets, I of course said, "Sure, I'd be delighted to, thanks very much." But as the time grew nigh, I became somewhat anxious about speaking in these pages, for I still know, truth be told, very little about the whole British thing, especially about what might be referred to as the young Brit post-avant. I mean, I've done some reading since, and I know that I know more than most US poets about it, even if less than some others... But still, what right do I have, as a somewhat obscure and eccentric Yank poet, to speak?

Well, I walked around with this persistent question for a couple days, but by and by I began to think: Why is it that the reviewing of poetry is always more or less about the reviewer? That is, why is the review always about *the view* of the "reviewer," as if what he or she had to say were more interesting or useful than the view of the author himself or herself? Why shouldn't the *poet* who is the subject be the one to primarily speak about his or her own work, be a protagonist, even, within the review's fictitious world, the reviewer acting more as a kind of semi-amanuensis, a supporting actor, limited, in the modesty of his or her position as attendant (admiring or not) to telling a few Boswell-like stories here and there, adding a few supplementary opinions in the process, fusing at certain transgressive or luminous moments with the Poet's Voice, but never losing sight of his or her Johnny-come-lately fluctuating position? Would such an approach not be a salutary one, insofar as it might help gently unfasten the buckles and straps of a genre long bound by customs of epistemological presumption and claim, customs that render, in ritualized fashion, interior scenes or landscapes whose convincing, life-like, but decidedly simulacral critical effects are fashioned by means of perspectival tricks carefully plotted out by the reviewer from whose eyes unseen lines of axiology converge in multiple vanishing points that are, when one thinks about it, akin to tiny coagulations of ideology (inasmuch as the expectations of evaluation's productive mode and relations of exchange are ideological through and through)? I mean, really, what is the literary field, populated as it is by Authors, be they Poets or Critics, if not a vast space of tiny bodies orbiting and crashing and disappearing in the vicinity of a great central Black Holum?

That last question is a bit of a non-sequitur, I know. But that's how Nicanor Parra, a physicist by training who invented Anti-Poetry, put it. Not that I'm a physicist, but might some similar idiosyncratic formal gesture within the genre of reviewing—a sort of Anti-Reviewyng—provide for some refreshingly uncommon things to happen, such as the eruption into “evaluation” of autobiographical, even fantastical material? Material, that is to say, beyond the reviewer's scripted and panoramic command, enacting a sort of drama that bears forth, in a reversed Brechtian fashion, the basal artifice, arbitrariness, and hubris of the genre's nature? Well, easier said than done, no question... But wouldn't Eric Mottram and Bob Cobbing, in principle, have approved?

Well, then, so the bookums had come in the mail, and among them, as chance would choose, was Andrew Duncan's *Savage Survivals: amid modern suavity*, published by Tony Frazer's terrific Shearsman Books—the very same Tony Frazer who had chaired the panel back in 2004 on Duncan's book of criticism! What a small worlde the worlde of poetry is...

Anyway, after my surprise had somewhat subsided, I set the other materials in the package asyde (which included an absolutely puzzling new chapbookum by the great J.H. Prynne, but more on this at a later date) and began to leaf through this elegantly produced bookum. I was immediately taken by it, for it's really quite wonderful, being largely composed of quasi-mythick figures who populate the poems with vital and idiosyncratic brio, not to mention utter anachronistic logicke, temporally, spatially, and linguistically speakyng. You see, I knew a bit about this bookum before it came by coincidence into my hands, so perhaps that predisposed me to be somewhat partial towards it. Let me see if I can explaine.

Later, in the evening of the day after the panel presentation on *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, Duncan and I (was it because no one else wanted to be with us? I can't remember) went together to the famous Eagle Publet. We sat near the table where Francis and Crick had announced their discovery of DNA. We had been talking and drinking a while, Duncan telling me about the poems he was currentlye working on, how these new poems were different from his former work, which had tended to be tethered to politickal and personal poles, while this new bookum represented a kind of spelunking into mythe—not, that is, Mythe of the handed-down, canonical kinde, but re-articulations and translucinations of various types, so that the results were anachronistic, as I'd said, just a bit ago, culturally and historically—outright fabrications, in other words; assorted arcane incunabula; transpositions, for example, of a Chinese classic to contemporary Edinburgh, filtered through the plot of a Bruce Lee movie; the sublimated intercourses of satellite photography; growing up in Turkey; the sound of

the poetry of the Myddle Ages; things like that, all thrown into the mix, he explained. Then he went on to talk about Stephen Tallents, who'd been Head of Ideology for the British Empire after WWI, and about propaganda as modern myth, how an unfolding counter-mythology could be developed by using, in part, the symbologies of its techne. I remember he talked with great force about a poet named Joseph Macleod, but I can't now remember what he said about him.

That sounds quite strange, I said, lighting a Dunhill with an affected flair. Like you took Pound's *Frigidaire* in *Propertius* and plugged it into a massive search engine, or something.

Well, actually, he said, the subtitle is "amid modern suavity," and yes, I suppose it's a bit like standing the old boys on their heads: I'm working on a poem right now, in fact, called "The Dressmaker," which seems to want to be a kind of parody of *Prufrock*, to some extent. Another, "Weapons Form with Music," the longest, is patterned after *The Cantos* at approximately 1/32 scale... Well no, that's an exaggeration, but would you like to hear a section of it to have a flavor?

Sure, I said, taking a long swallow of my bitter. Let's have it.

Duncan, a bit tipsy by this point, as was I, stood and recited, in a kind of Tennysonian wax cylinder sing-song, at a building speed (though for length I cannot quote entire) that can only be likened to a particle accelerator's intensity, and the whole publet, quite crowded, grew silent with rapt attention:

Jade Lion gives up editing an avant-garde poetry magazine and joins the outlaws of the marsh; the unjustly banished heroes drink lager to excess

I'd just taken my giro to the Post Office
That day I slaked my thirst
In a way I never will forget
The eight heroes of Liang Shan Po just walked up to the rail
And struck Bar Attitude Number 4—
I didn't know that then.
They were so cool the whole room froze
The beer at the tap stopped pouring
The smoke in the air stopped drifting
The flames in the hearth stopped flickering
The ceiling fan slowed down to single rotary strokes
Which were the knocking of my heart

The waves of sex and Qi made me stagger.
It felt like fear but I was drunk on it
I felt my old self die
I knew this old town and its syllabic metres could never hold me

I knew I would grow up to go stravaiging,
Hanging bishops, impaling dragoons, chasing tigers. Things like that.
It wasn't the usual gloom in the Subdued Fiends Hall.

The heroes with black hair and blue eyes were wearing
double dragon belt buckles made from Arctic copper
high boots made of unpolished soft fawn calfskin
shirts of linen dyed with saffron
red ear-lapping fox-fur caps with blue waving aigrettes
cloaks made of blue and gold tassels
cherkesskas with chest bandoliers of burnished brass rifle cartridges
sgians with glass pommels in leather sheaths on gold braid galloons
penannular bronze cloakclasps with inlaid affronted writhing beasts
T-shirts with big Iggy transfers printed on them
and leopard-skin pillbox hats.

They were carrying lost WS Graham books and original Elmore James acetates
—casual like. That's when I said to myself,
these guys are not on the Minimum Wage,
Any cooler, and your joints seize up.
Hey Rodolfo
I'll have what they're having
I went to the games console just to practise standing, a bit.
I walked up and I stared at them real hard.
Is it true you're the lads killed Ni Erh?

We were expecting you, said Lu Ta.

When he was finished, the patrons began to clap, but in a very serious and respectful way, not sarcastically, as would have been the case if this had been the Unyted States. Truly, even, I saw some heavysset matrons dabbing their eyes.

Duncan sat back down, sweat pouring from his sideburnians. This is all incredibly ambitious, I said. And I've got to tell you, that first section sounds astoundingly like my "Orientalist Haibun" from a few years back, thank you for the nod, I'm honored. It's no small gesture to set forth to create one's own mythologickal cosmology. It puts me in mind, a byt, of George Psalmanazar, who in the eighteenth century created a full-blown ethnography, a detailed cultural study of the land of Formosa, by which he meant Japan, and this included, even, analysis of its language, which he himself invented, a full-blown lexicography and grammare. Do you know about this scandale, which Johnson himself was deeply involved in, as an attacker upon Psalmanazar?

Duncan became quite animated: Indeed I do! There's a phrase by Psalmanazar, in fact, that has haunted me and which in fact lies at the origin of these new poems: "Corroded by symbolism."

Corroded by symbolysme? I said.

Yes, you see, modernism forward hides from this: the avant-garde thinks it intervenes through art into a world whose codes it can read and understand and thus foil and subvert. It is deconstructive in push and aim, but its target is a picture it falsely takes to be the Real. And this is why the Culture Industry always wins... The avant-garde, always-already aestheticized, through and through, down to its analytical smirk and cool, gets sucked into a symbolic canvas that ideology has primed—it becomes part of the scenery, and what is History, if not corroded scenery?

So, fundamentally, I interjected, if I am understanding you, Andrew, what you mean is that ideology feeds off the very avant gestures that would earnestly wrestle with the structures of its Form, that the construction of mythe, for you, constitutes a means, via excess, of eluding its frame, which is really the frame of the “Rules of the Game”?

Yes, said Duncan, the Guinness globe behind his head like a black moone, it’s a matter of what attitude Poetry assumes before the social order: if one takes the latter as primary field, then one is scaffolded from within, ipso facto, by a closely spaced lattice of symbological struts; but if the social structure is made a small thing, something that can fit inside one’s head, well, the area of poeisis suddenly becomes infinite and free.

And the camp-excess of the mythick, I said, this is a way of breaking free?

Yes, he said, Provisionally speaking... And provisional gestures, at the moment, those counter-intuitive to traditional avant-garde programs, are the ones we have left for recovering poetry’s relevance. It’s not an end in itself, mind you, but a holding action, a guarding of its ancient, rusting cache.

Oho, a holding action... Like Adorno? I said.

No, no, not like Adorno, he said. My point is that it’s not a matter of form. Form as politics or resistance is the mirage of Ideology. It is a matter of building new structures of Reality.

Aha, like Stevens, I said.

Yes, yes, more like Stevens, heretical as I suppose that sounds, he said. It’s a matter of creating new symbological systems that might come to break off, spin-off into new dimensions. A parallel economy or realm of Supra-Fictions—small, infolded, hermetic violences, in rapid rotation around the Supreme Violence without.

Back in Freeport, Illinois now, and two years hence, and after reading through, astonished by the singular, bizarre language of it, I wrote Duncan, purposely making the font very tinye (an illogical but stronge impulse of mine lately) and asking him, for my pleasure, to do the same:

Andrew:

Kent Johnson here. You might remember me from the CCCP we were at together not so long ago. How are you? I am reviewing your new book of poetry (the one from Shearsman—tremendous!) for the upcoming issue of Chicago Review and I am going to do it a bit differently than your standard review, I think. We'll see what happens.

I would very much appreciate your sending me any comments on the book that you might find worth my consideration as I mull things over. How you see the pieces going together, the overall conceptual push of the work, its place vis à vis the other "dominant" approaches within the UK avant, etc. I ask this very rapidly and awkwardly, on my way out of town on Friday for a spell, where and when I hope to get some work done on this, so hoping against hope you might be able to write me just a few notes by tomorrow! (In responding, would you please do so in size #8 font, as I happen to favor (it is an idiosyncrasy) email in such miniaturesque setting.)

And the next day, Duncan wrote back:

I don't think the avant scene here would approve of the book. There may be some overlap with Kelvin Corcoran, writing about myth and archaeology.

As I told you that fine afternoon at The Eagle, the book represents a break with writing about autobiography and writing about politics—mainstays of my previous work. So it's a leap into the dark. A leap into myth and subjectivity. The line of writing about personal myth is despised by the avant-garde & associated not only with female poets but also with being subjective and unsophisticated.

I researched while editing the selected poems of Joseph Macleod and found a character called Stephen Tallents who was effectively Head of Ideology for the British Empire between the wars. In my last book, I wrote a long poem about him, or more about the historical vision he promoted. He controlled the funding of documentary film, which in reality was propaganda. The documentary work gave me the strength to write about myth. I thought very intensively about sociology for a couple of years, and became interested in the visual presentation of ideology. The phrase "corroded by symbolism" haunted me, as if some pristine object was falling from the sky and had the features of our cosmology burnt into it as it descended. I decided that the social structure was a small thing, if every human could carry round a version of it in their heads. In fact, it had to be a system of symbolic oppositions, from which behaviour or perceptions could be generated at the necessary moment. Propaganda is modern myth, and a detailed investigation of wartime films (things Tallents was involved in) gave me the core understanding I needed to write my own myths.

"Twelve Days" is about the chaos which precedes the invention of structure and order. Flows and substances without features.

"The star temple at Sumatar Harabesi" relates to a set of frescoes at Ferrara (Schifanoia, which means "shunning boredom") in a calendrical cycle which may have been the inspiration for Macleod's calendrical cycle "The Ecliptic."

"Twelve days" is also a calendrical poem... er, sort of. The opulent and sophisticated courtiers of the Schifanoia frescoes bear definite resemblances to the affluent and elegant consumers who appear in advertisements... such as Tallents devised symbolic schemes for. Macleod hated Tallents.

Subjectivity and fantasy rule. The air-photographing pilot in "Vertical features made out" discovers a vast and lost prehistoric earth structure in the photos because that is what he wishes to find. As opposed to something practical and tedious. The details of all the poems are improvised to see if they would come out looking like myths. I wasn't interested in just retelling existing myths. The ogres in "Twelve Days" have seven fingers and seven toes because the earliest land vertebrates did. Having

five fingers was a key transition. In short this could be a cosmology for a society which does not yet exist.

I found this very interesting and thought for a bit, and wrote Duncan back yet again:

Yes, thanks, this helps me to recall that marvelous evening we spent at The Eagle. I just have to ask one more question: You say:

“Subjectivity and fantasy rule... The details of all the poems are improvised to see if they would come out looking like myths. I wasn’t interested in just retelling existing myths.”

*However, scholars of myth, from Fraser, to Jung, to Cassirer, to Langdon, to Frye, etc, would say that the details of myths are always improvised—in certain senses *necessarily* improvised—over deep structural tensions that have homology across cultures and times. It is this deeper content that is the essence, of course. So even with this improvising, as you call it, do you hope, in this “turn toward myth” you’ve yourself taken, to also partake, however humbly, of underlying, collective energies of retelling—do you hope to bring forth something hidden but surviving of the “savage”? And, if so, what possibilities might this poetic path hold for our experimental poetry?*

And Duncan wrote back:

I will reluctantly admit that “Savage Survivals” is not an honest description of the contents but simply a phrase, melodramatic and obsolete, which I found arresting. Surely it points to some short story by Arthur Machen in which it is revealed that natives of remote Welsh hill villages turn into serpents when under pressure, or to some late 1950s TV series where a pipe-smoking host invites us weekly to go one step beyond, across the twilight zone, into the unsteady sulphurous light which picks out savage survivals. How lamentable that I was too apathetic to actually write these teeming narratives! How deplorable that every other young poet at Cambridge in the 1970s learnt to write like Prynne—while I mysteriously failed to modernise.

The “deep structural homologies” may be no more than the shape of the lens through which the occidental scholar is peering. What I am writing is not primitive but primary—a suspension of rationality and the personality in an area protected by a cultural or calendrical barrier. Myth if collective must be preset; there are stories which everyone tells; there is a lurch when one moves into free improvisation which makes me almost sick with excitement but which also threatens to leave me in a space which is “personal” in the sense that no-one else can follow me there. The thrill of improvising is the possibility which agitates me. (I hope it agitates others, that others might join along, not in my manner, of course, but alongside, as it were.)

It was his sentence, “How deplorable that every other young poet at Cambridge in the 1970s learnt to write like Prynne—while I mysteriously failed to modernise,” that stuck hard in my mind, as I fingered the elegant cover of J.H. Prynne’s brief bookum. I ran my digit tips (or *yemas* as the Spanish wonderfully has it: “yolks” of the fingers) over the catalog-quality impression of the title, *To Pollen*, and all over the Author’s name beneath, so inset was it... And my eyes rolled back into my headum and went whyte.

Next up, Chapter 2: J.H. Prynne’s To Pollen (Barque, 2006) and strange, ominous occurrences in the gardens of Pembroke.

Kent Johnson