



Ian Brinton, 'Andrew Duncan, *Nothing is being suppressed: British Poetry of the 1970s*, Shearsman Books, 328pp, 2022.' (2023) 15(1): *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.10165>



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## Andrew Duncan, *Nothing is being suppressed: British Poetry of the 1970s*, Shearsman Books, 328pp, 2022

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### **'The social nature of conversation'**

Some years ago Andrew Duncan published an account of the 'Poetry Boom' which took place between 1990 and 2010 and the subtitle for his Shearsman volume was 'Shocked Grains Wash Up As a Beach'. I recall at the time being both heartened and amused by the energetic merging of highly interesting insights into what it means to read a poem and some waspish accounts of individual moments within the poetry scene.

One of the passages I also remember from that earlier book is highly pertinent to this new picture which Duncan gives us of the 1970s. It was in the 2015 book that he asserted that the only purpose of poetry is the first-hand experience of someone inside the poem where 'everything happening depends wholly and solely on individual judgements and acts of appreciation.'<sup>1</sup> It should come as no surprise then to recognise in this new book that Andrew Duncan remains a close reader of poetry and a critic whose values are presented in a manner that is both sharp and uncompromising. As one reads this remarkable and stimulating new picture of the 1970s poetry scene one is presented unsurprisingly with something that is out of the ordinary. As Alan Baker has already suggested in his review published in *Litter Magazine* if one looks at Duncan's book in the expectation of finding conventional literary criticism one is going to be disappointed 'but to read it as a creative work in its own right, and a glimpse into the workings of a highly insightful mind with a vast knowledge of his subject ranging from broad historical sweep to tiny detail' one comes to recognise the process of thinking: the book possesses an exploratory air.

*Nothing is being suppressed* opens with the assertive tone of an explorer contemplating a new landscape as Duncan claims in his introduction that he is 'not trying to re-evaluate a period that has passed by' because as he suggests 'It was never evaluated in the first place, so this is the first run.'<sup>2</sup> I have to confess that this statement leaves me a little unsure when I recall the introduction to the *Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry* (Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion) in which the editors had put forward the provocatively dismissive statement, now almost legendary, about very little seemed to have been happening in poetry in England during the 1960s and 70s. Although the anthology was published in 1982 and therefore outside the time-scheme of Duncan's survey, many of the poems included in it are from volumes published in the 1970s and this might lead one to consider that anthology as a type of 'evaluation' by virtue of its choice of material. However, Duncan's survey is of a different quality altogether and its focus is upon a world of social and political background which gives a fascinating perspective on what was happening during that decade.

Some of the most compelling sections of Duncan's new book are his close textual accounts of individual poems and his four-page reading of Andrew Crozier's *High Zero*

(1978) is a case in point. Looking closely at how Crozier's volume arose out of two other publications from the 1970s, Prynne's *High Pink on Chrome* (1975) and John James's *Striking the Pavilion of Zero* (1975), he notes how the atmosphere of the third sequence is

is intellectual but also instantaneous. The arbitrary limits of the work demand the ability to make impromptus. By taking on very recent poems by Prynne and James, the poet rejects the recession into deeply internal processes – and upholds the evanescent, social nature of conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Going on to interview Crozier in 2006, Duncan suggested that it was difficult to look at *High Zero* 'without having a kind of shimmer of a different text it's made out of'<sup>4</sup> and that comment had prompted Crozier to make suggestions about the ways words themselves appear on a page, black on white, hauntingly disposed to leave 'the trace of before.'<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is that very 'trace' which Duncan himself has come to recognise in his use of the word 'evanescent' and his acknowledgement of the 'social nature of conversation.'

The twelve-page account Duncan gives of his reading of Prynne's *News of Warring Clans* (1977) is one of the most compelling sections of the book as he asserts that one principle of the poem is spontaneity, the site of each line or sentence being where the poet's attention has moved to and then goes on to say 'there is no code to be cracked, all the language is natural but the context may be moving faster than our grasp of it is.'<sup>6</sup> As if sharing a conversational moment with the reader Duncan now asks 'This is the feel of modern life, isn't it?' and he alerts us to a volume of Edward Dorn's poems from the late 1960s, *The North Atlantic Turbine* (1967). Quoting from a 1971 critical work by Jonathan Raban, *The Society of the Poem*, in which Dorn's language is perceived as coming 'as close as it is possible to move to the public demand for a humanizing voice which will speak clearly from the centre of what often seems to be an increasingly impersonal universe'<sup>7</sup> Duncan presents the reader with lines from Prynne's poem:

Good  
taste was shunted into the slogan vestry and  
reconstructed as billboard nostalgia: the purest  
central dogma in the history of trash.<sup>8</sup>

As a critic and close reader of Prynne's poetry he comments that

the poet reacts to the behaviour on show with a judgement which not only captures the behaviour so that we can see it but also normalises the alien present, that is suggests that a higher order of social knowledge places it and qualifies the

decisions of the social actors involved. In fact, we are at no point being presented with a breakdown of the capacity for judgement. The strain is rather in our ability to assimilate the extraordinary speed at which political events are rushing past us.<sup>9</sup>

There is a delightful informality of tone in the way Duncan engages his reader in conversation and we can hear the voice of a man who appears to be in the same room with us and who is reading with eyes wide open. The intensity of this conversation he is having with the reader is unmistakably before us as he tells us that *News of Warring Clans* is a poem which ‘offers modernity and the matching collapse of our powers to keep up with the plot’<sup>10</sup> whilst going on to add that at no point does it suggest the ‘irrelevance of behavioural norms, acts of social bargaining and exchange, or of the decisions which people make in the course of behaving.’<sup>11</sup> The manner in which this is written, its style of criticism, brings before us exactly what he has hinted at in referring to the upholding of the ‘evanescent, social nature of conversation’. For this reader I find myself wishing to place the world of the 1970s into a perspective that I can recognise some fifty years later as my mind is drawn to ‘October’, a much later poem by John James from his 2012 collection *Cloud Breaking Sun*, in which a conversation with Prynne became the lifting of the lid of a Pandora’s box:

It smelt of wet dust after rain  
I think it was called hope<sup>12</sup>

One of the long poems from the early 1970s that Duncan looks at in detail is Roy Fisher’s *The Cut Pages* (1971) and here again he invites us to recognise the background of the writing of the poem before linking it to what he sees as so important about the whole seventies culture:

so the work was taken forward with no programme beyond the principle that it should not know where its next meal was coming from. It was unable to anticipate, but it could have on the spot whatever it could manage to ask for.

Duncan describes *The Cut Pages* as ‘just about the most advanced poetry happening in England at that time’ and offers us the question as to whether the poem becomes ‘a unified artistic statement or a large set of discontinuities’.<sup>13</sup> It is quite typical of his conversational and persuasive tone to then go on to present an argument by use of close analogy:

Although moving rapidly down many different paths, the piece has a dimension: as, if we looked at a honeycomb, we could see the average diameter of the cell. This would allow us to recognise the text, if we saw a fragment of it. The cells could be

repeated indefinitely, whatever different things they contain the thickness of the walls and the diameter of the cells are structural constants. The link with a state of irresolution and distress is significant: as I am arguing that these were key factors in Seventies art.<sup>14</sup>

Duncan opened his book on the poetry of the 1970s with a very clear agenda and a tone of defiant assertion as he emphasised that his career as a critic ‘started with resentment at the false gatekeepers who denied the existence of an alternative poetry’.<sup>15</sup> It is with a sense of mischievous delight that he also goes on to tell us that the phrase *Nothing is being suppressed* is a piece of dialogue from a 1972 episode of *Doomwatch* and he closes the volume with a tone of wistful lyricism:

I think what we are seeing is a whole theme park of abandoned poetic projects, exotic because no path runs to them, staggering in their numbers and diversity. A desert landscape full of incomplete but beautiful structures.<sup>16</sup>

For me both the social nature of conversation and the individual voice of a critic haunt the entire book and I turn to the last issue of *Grosseteste Review* (1983–4) to read Prynne’s letter to Duncan in which he had suggested that ‘You won’t care for critique in any form, and mostly because you alienate yourself from its usual motives.’<sup>17</sup> Whatever those usual motives may be what becomes abundantly clear to the reader of Duncan’s work is the shimmering landscape which lies before the energetic and enquiring critic.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Andrew Duncan, *A Poetry Boom, 1990–2010*, p. 147.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Duncan, *Nothing is being suppressed*, p. 9.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 163.
- <sup>4</sup> Tim Allen & Andrew Duncan, *Don't Start Me Talking*, p. 127.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 127.
- <sup>6</sup> Duncan, *Nothing is being suppressed*, p. 210.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211.
- <sup>8</sup> J.H. Prynne, *Poems*, p. 282.
- <sup>9</sup> Duncan, *Nothing is being suppressed*, p. 211.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211.
- <sup>12</sup> John James, *Cloud Breaking Sun*.
- <sup>13</sup> Duncan, *Nothing is being suppressed*, p. 150.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 151.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 313.
- <sup>17</sup> *Grosseteste Review*, vol. 15, p. 100.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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