



# Into the Labyrinth

Gavin Selerie and Andrew Duncan

*Argotist Ebooks*

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In November 2011, I visited Gavin Selerie in North West London for an interview that ultimately stretched over four day-long sessions. The immediate lure was a visual-verbal commentary on his 1996 long poem *Roxy*, which I had acquired a copy of part of, and which was a glimpse of a labyrinth of trophies, troves and associations, more complex than the poem itself. It hinted at an inner world where every space was covered with images, enveloping like a novel with a hundred characters. I wanted to drop a microphone into that labyrinth.

Andrew Duncan  
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# Into the Labyrinth

## Session One: 19 November 2011

**AD:** I thought for the very first question I'd ask you to comment on the last poem in *Le Fanu's Ghost*. The whole thing may be a riddle or it may be composed of seven separate riddles.

**GS:** I think that might have been the first poem I wrote, or one of the first, for this book. It is indeed a series of riddles. I'm floundering a bit because I probably haven't read this since very early days. Maybe not since the book was published. 'When you know the answer you still forget' is not just applicable to Gothic literature, it's like the experience of watching *Macbeth*. It's part of the wonder of revisiting something that a work of art still comes alive. But maybe beyond that, also, there is always more than one answer. These specific images, 'the secret of the Green Chamber', 'the deed in the red box', 'mov[ing] behind stamped leather', maybe 'the flower', but certainly 'speak[ing] French from a spire of hair'. All of these are motifs, maybe actually specific episodes, from Le Fanu's works. Now I see the penultimate line, 'Is there a devil in Deverell', that suggests to me that it all came, in one sense, out of Le Fanu's novel *Guy Deverell*, which I've got on the shelves up there, in the Dover edition. Yes, I think the point of putting this at the end was to keep the book open-ended, but also to remind the reader of the procedures involved in suspense literature. And my whole quest for the patterns which keep recurring in the writings of these mainly—but not exclusively—Anglo-Irish writers, many of whom were linked by family, linked by blood. I think that's probably as specific as I can be. I liked the riddle format, which I used a fair bit in the book. Obviously I enjoyed riddles as a child, but I did teach a course of nonsense poetry for Birkbeck, I suspect in the 1990s, and I think some of the procedures in the book come out of that. Noel Malcolm's *The Origins of English Nonsense* is particularly illuminating. I'm also fond of Hugh Houghton's anthology of nonsense verse. He arrived at York, I think, the term after I left. That was where I did my post-graduate work. He's someone I've only met once but whom I respect very much, as audience. And I do recommend that anthology.

**AD:** 'Jackety Jiggit', it does sound like the title of a nonsense rhyme, perhaps a counting-out rhyme. Is that what it is?

**GS:** I think perhaps it is. I've got a number of much earlier anthologies of nonsense verse and I may well have picked that phrase out of such a text. What did it suggest to you without comment by me? Did it perplex you?

**AD:** The last time I looked at it I had this functional reaction, which is, "Aha, this needs comment and would benefit from comment". I can see these are questions which are in the middle of a Gothic plot, where the plot is driven by the fact that the questions are unanswered and the narrative answers them. As the last poem in a long book, it's provocative.

**GS:** I'm quite attracted to the ancient Greek idea of a short comic piece at the end of a tragedy. These satyr-plays are a form of burlesque. An equivalent occurred a good deal in 18th Century and 19th Century theatre where usually there were two plays on the bill. It's an interesting revival of that structure of presenting drama.

**AD:** So there might be a lack of laughs in Gothic?

**GS:** I think one of the theses of this book, if I dare use that word, is that Le Fanu's work, rather unusually for Gothic writing, involves a good deal of comedy, but it's very subtle. Perhaps comedy is too extreme a word, but there's a great deal of irony which I think he inherits from his great-uncle Sheridan. I think he was probably conscious of that.

I forgot to say that there is an illustration opposite, created after the poem. Looking at it now, I think this illuminates the text.

**AD:** So it shows some rather crafty and dubious-looking individuals around a gaming table, probably? Inside a spade from a playing card. So they're gambling, and the spade does tend to mean bad luck, actually. One of them has an eye-patch.

**GS:** Yes, they're dissolute and reckless characters, as you say, bending over a gaming table. The images used in the illustrations were collaged by Alan Halsey. I supplied him with the images and he selected images to create collages for each section of the book. So it's another example of our collaboration. I can't remember which book that comes from. It might even be a Harrison Ainsworth novel, *The Spendthrift*. Le Fanu does write a fair bit about gambling, but I allowed myself to incorporate some extraneous material. It's obviously a common motif in the literature of that period or of that genre. This may be by Phiz, who produced striking illustrations for Le Fanu's second novel. I would say it's him rather than Cruikshank, although their styles somewhat overlap. I might mention that Harrison Ainsworth was a passion of mine as a boy, for instance *Guy Fawkes*, an enthusiasm which I shared with Eric Mottram. I had a conversation with Eric, who said, 'No one reads Ainsworth any more, do they?' and I said I did.

**AD:** *Windsor Forest*. I've just been reading scenes from Eric's poem [*A Book of Herne*] where he uses that. But we'd better not get into that. I will jump something in here—I was going to ask a question about West House Books because among other things it's remarkable that you were collaborating with them at the time of *Azimuth* and still are. It's rather a long history. I wanted to talk about that. I guess West House books is Alan Halsey?

**GS:** Yes that's true. Initially based in Hay-on-Wye and subsequently in Sheffield. I think quite a number of the writers published by West House are in some way friends and acquaintances of Alan. That might be very common in the small press world and perhaps always has been, but in this case I think it's particularly meaningful in terms of possible connections. For example David Annwn is someone published by that press who I feel things in common with. I think there's an overlap in terms of mythological themes and also use of Celtic patterns of language. The writing comes out of some common matrix, different though we all are. Martin Corless-Smith is another writer I admire very much. About to make one of his rare re-appearances in this country. We share a fondness for seventeenth century literature.

**AD:** I think one of the reasons why West House is distinctive is the length of the books. It does seem to me that the 70s were the great era of the long poem, that there was a whole political and cultural milieu which called for them. *Azimuth* is a bit late in that cycle and by that time very few book-length poems were being published. So West House was a good home for this kind of thing.

**GS:** *Azimuth* is a Binnacle book. That was before West House was set up. *Roxy* is my first West House book.

**AD:** I must have misread a credits list!

**GS:** Well, Alan did the graphics for *Azimuth*, so that was the start of a publishing connection. But what you were saying goes for *Roxy*, which is my second long poem. It's a long poem in a more conventional sense in that it is in numbered sections which I think are entirely left-margin based, so there is an overall coherence, whereas in *Azimuth* and *Le Fanu's Ghost* I was trying to be more eclectic and maybe consciously striving for different moods of writing within an overall text. But what you say about the 1970s is true, I remember being so excited by the long poems I was reading. Obviously Olson's *Maximus* which, though written earlier, fed through to us in stages. Also Allen Fisher's *Place*, the later parts of which I witnessed being put together, mainly through hearing him read. I only came across Allen Fisher in 1978 when I came back to London, but I very quickly got enthused about what he was doing. I ought to make one other factual point. *Azimuth* although published in 1984 was begun in 1972. At least, I didn't have the idea of a long poem at that point but the earliest texts go back to 1972. In fact, there are lines incorporated in that text which go back to the 1960s, from notebooks. I stole lines from poems which I would now disown.

**AD:** Oxford has produced the lion's share of prominent conventional poets, but has been denied a share in the history of the Underground. I understand you have a slightly different view of this. Can you talk about the modernist current in Oxford poetry and what was happening in Oxford

poetry at the end of the Sixties?

**GS:** You're right, I do have a different view of this. Oxford does tend to be written out of this and people tend to think of it as the base for Craig Raine, now Tom Paulin, and of course people think of that OUP list of poets most of whom, other than Roy Fisher and Basil Bunting, were not adventurous in the way we desire and approve of. But it's interesting to compare Oxford with Cambridge. As you imply I did my first degree at Oxford. I went up in the autumn of 1968 after spending almost a year in North America, what would now be called a gap year. And I spent three years studying. It was an extremely heady time when the walls were coming down. Literally there were slogans from Blake's poems sprayed on the mediaeval walls, which stays on my mind. I was much involved with radical Oxford politics. Christopher Hitchens and Hilary Wainwright were prominent figures, and Tariq Ali, who had graduated a couple of years before, used to come back quite a bit. That was part of the mix, along with Music, Film and Poetry. Sally Purcell was publishing some of the early Carcanet books. I think Carcanet started in Cambridge but didn't stay there for very long and by 1968 it was based in a village outside Oxford, South Hinksey. So that provided a base of sorts, although of course she was publishing older writers like Crashaw, Smart and Chatterton. It was a partial recovery of neglected material. There was an interesting George Peele *Selected*. But in terms of contemporary work there were quite a few interesting readings at the Oxford Poetry Society. My friend and publisher Glenn Storhaug was involved with the Poetry Society. I didn't actively know him at the time although we worked out that we must have been at events together. Certainly we were both involved in the campaign to instate Barry MacSweeney as poetry professor, in that chair. Barry subsequently completely disowned the campaign and the whole impetus of it.

**AD:** Barry disowned everything at one time or another.

**GS:** He argued that he was put up for it by the publishing director at Hutchinson. This may be true, that they seized the main chance there. But for undergraduates, students who were interested in more experimental poetry, there was great excitement in having Barry come to read. I think I remember distributing leaflets at a rally, although my memory is rather hazy. The reading that Barry gave would probably have been in the pub up Walton Street in Jericho. As well as live readings, and I can't remember who else I heard in Oxford around that point, Parker's bookshop, which was very close to my college, had all of the Fulcrum books.

**AD:** Cape Goliard?

**GS:** Yes. One of which I have pulled out for your perusal.

**AD:** Subject pulls out Object from pile.

**GS:** This is Gary Snyder's *A Range of Poems* in the Fulcrum edition. In brown parcel paper covers, with script that's almost Chinese but it's using our letters. This is something I bought at Parker's at a time when I could ill afford it. I exchanged my meal tickets for cash. The college food was appalling and my girlfriend and I used to cook on a little stove in my room instead and eat healthier food we thought, but some of that money I saved went on books such as this. 42 shillings, there we are. I already knew a good deal about Gary Snyder and some of the other American poets published by Fulcrum from *The New American Poetry*, which I picked up during my year in America. Inside it says 'Chicago 1968'. I bought it at Oak Street Bookstore in Oldtown, which at that time was full of brownstone buildings, and it was the Bohemian area. I worked in a French restaurant called Jacques, on North Michigan Avenue, and I had to dodge the curfew to get there, which was during the riots.

**AD:** The Democratic Convention?

**GS:** No, this was the riots after the shooting of Martin Luther King, earlier in the year. The West side went up in flames, or so it seemed from a distance, and Mayor Daley introduced a security clampdown, with masses of National Guardsmen on the street. I refer to this in 'Barricade Music',

the elegy for Phil Ochs [from *Azimuth*]. When I wasn't working, I used to spend a lot of time watching underground films in a cinema in Oldtown and browsing in this bookshop which, unsurprisingly, no longer exists. I bought many things there, including the Vintage edition of *Ulysses*, which retains the full-page initial letters for each of the main sections. The kind of effect I like. I'm flicking through this anthology, I knew the Beats and various other people from the mid-sixties, but I discovered Charles Olson here. I think it would have been March 1968 when I bought the anthology. 'The Kingfishers' hit me particularly. Snyder must be in here somewhere. 'Riprap' is here and 'Myths and Texts, Part III: Burning'. There's a particular sequence I love in *A Range*: 'Four Poems for Robin'. I haven't read this for years. It has that staggered line with a kind of caesura, as in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Also while I was at Oxford I acquired Duncan, *The Years as Catches*. This was the first book of Duncan's that I got heavily into. I didn't actually acquire most of the Fulcrum books until later on. I got quite a few of them from Stuart and Deirdre Montgomery, after they'd closed the press. I'd picked up others along the way before that. 'Catches' was a book that strongly aroused my interest, also Ginsberg's *Angkor Wat* with the Alexandra Lawrence photos which I now understand are not from Angkor Wat but from some other temple, quite nearby. This was my prize possession, October 1969: Pound's *Cantos*, in the marvellous black cloth edition with a black dust jacket. I read this very intensively and I think everything I've done since has been greatly influenced by the *Cantos*. I don't think I'd heard Pound read at that point. But fairly soon afterwards I acquired a record of him reading from, I think, the Spoleto Festival. Obviously after that I discovered other recordings. Don't you think that hearing a poet read their work is part of the way in? Are you of the other persuasion on that point? Do you think that gets in the way?

**AD:** If you're selling books, and if you're trying to tell someone in the deep provinces, like where I grew up, that it's in the book, this will deliver whatever it is that culture has to deliver, then you do believe in books. I think most poets write poems to be printed, as I do. On the other hand, if you hear someone read, and it's a real poet, you hear their voice inside the poems forever after. Actually it does change an awful lot in ways I can't define. I'm afraid that's rather exclusive for people who live, as most people do, away from big cultural centres.

**GS:** Maybe Pound isn't a particularly good example of someone whose voice provides a way in. After all he did change his reading style, several times. But Olson would be a very good example. I think hearing tapes of Olson read, which I became absolutely obsessed by during my years in Yorkshire, provided much more of a way into his work than the 'Projective Verse' essay or any of the essays in *Human Universe*. The obvious bookmark in the *Cantos* is Canto 16 which is one of the Hell Cantos. I like the Blakean imagery here. He actually refers to 'the running form naked Blake shouting whirling his arms'. Glad Day or Albion rising from the Mill. A figure 'Howling against the evil'. And Canto 80 which I've written an essay about, 15 lines from Canto 80. They're both poems which involve looking back at London and the first two decades of the 20th century. But they remain topical, not just historical. Here's the other book I wanted to mention from that time, Robert Creeley's *Poems 1950-65*. This is still my preferred way of reading Creeley. As the inscription says: 'Bought after hearing him read at the International Poetry Festival, 21st July, 1969.' I already knew his work from the *New American Poetry*. Hearing him read and almost break down and recover, as he often did, with all those hesitations and that gradual re-finding of a text in performance. That struck me—very much in contrast to Auden who read, at the same Festival, it must have been the same evening. Who was stony in his manner. And I remember particularly offended me by saying that he could no longer rely on an audience knowing the classical references. Which I was a little indignant about since I'd certainly studied the classical texts and learnt Latin in depth.

**AD:** This is what people think of when they think of Oxford. Arrogance, really, and a creativity which has stopped somewhere in the past, perhaps in the 1950s or perhaps in the 1660s. I want to divert this slightly. You're talking about American poets and not about Oxford as a scene. I'm attempting to rewrite history to say that poetry happened everywhere, not just where successful self-confident people decided it belonged to them. You mentioned Sally Purcell. Her poetry isn't very good, really. We can leave out Sally Purcell.

**GS:** Well, I can say that I heard visiting poets, besides Barry MacSweeney, who represented a more experimental approach. It wasn't until the 1970s that I became more aware of exactly what was going down. Certainly Cambridge was way in advance of Oxford in its awareness of those alternatives and this must go back to the Thirties and before that I suppose. Thirties or Forties, certainly. But it's interesting that you asked me to think of Oxford in relation to Cambridge. . .did you say that?

**AD:** No.

**GS:** Maybe I twisted that. But it might be useful to comment on the [possibly] different educational experiences. One of the people I heard at Oxford was Northrop Frye, who lectured on Blake, obviously, for two terms and the lectures were absolutely packed out. And he referred to the Oxford literature course as a guided tour of English literature. And that was so, in that you were meant to cover each period in a way that I don't think people tended to at Cambridge. I may be wrong. It was expansive and obviously the risk was of a kind of thinned-down access to literature. But if you were of an adventurous disposition you would home in on particulars. I spent a whole term on Blake, with the permission of my tutor. Working my way through the standard one-volume edition of Blake's writings. So the Oxford education actually stood me in good stead, in giving me a broad base from which I could home in on the things I wanted to, and I'm including in that contemporary literature, contemporary poetry. The native British poets I discovered in a more important way in the 1970s. Actually another figure I did see at Oxford was Pete Brown, who of course did lyrics for Cream. He had this group The Battered Ornaments. I was always interested in song, mediaeval or Elizabethan and folk songs later. Quite a bit of my access to poetry would have been through Poetry And Jazz events, or even rock events that involved a degree of poetry. Incidentally I think Oxford is still a centre of experimental jazz which marks it out as having a tradition that is not in the bracket of Craig Raine. I know I'm sliding from music to poetry there. It's maintained its avant-garde pursuit in the medium of jazz.

**AD:** So in Cambridge in the late 60s and 70s there was a group environment, a whole swarm of people writing very modern poetry and if you didn't write this poetry you were just not tolerated. If I'm looking for that in Oxford it sounds as if it just isn't there. You did have people reading this fabulous American stuff, and it's in the bookshops, but if undergraduates are writing poetry they are more in the 1950s styles, probably even Larkin.

**GS:** There was Michael Horovitz's *Children of Albion: Poetry of the 'Underground'*, which galvanized local activity. Horovitz had already left Oxford by the time I'm speaking of, but there was a line to writers such as Pete Brown who featured in the book. My copy of *Children of Albion* [picks it up] is dated 'October '69'. So these would have been some of the people I heard either in Oxford or in London. Obviously I used to come down to London quite often. Neil Oram I think I heard in a kind of arts centre, or could it have been Indica. I don't know. I was aware of all these things but you're right I didn't feel myself part of a group which was engaged in such activity within my university city. I did in terms of music but not in terms of poetry.

**AD:** Bang goes another attempt to rewrite history!

**GS:** I read this thing cover to cover. This is where I first encountered David Chaloner, on the page, and of course Crozier is in here as well. But it's a shame that Horovitz didn't include more of that

band of writers as opposed to Bernard Kops or Herbert Lomas. Oh, Adrian Mitchell is in here. He's another poet I met and heard.

**AD:** He was chucked out of Oxford, wasn't he?

**GS:** I don't know. His early poetry is pretty conservative, reflecting that 1950s period, but his formal training was later utilised for radical ends. Raworth's here and Gael Turnbull. So it was just a matter of time before I found a proper base to mesh with people in a poetry group. That didn't happen until my return to London in 1978 but then it happened in a big way.

**AD:** Gosh. That's quite late really. I'm going to load up with a question which I don't know if you can answer, which is why Oxford having dominated high-quality English poetry then lost it. I think that's going to remain a mystery really.

**GS:** Obviously there are writers who are products of Oxford who went about things in a more adventurous way, but I do think there is a residual conservatism in Oxford. My years there were an absolute blip. It may sound extreme of me to say this but I used to visit Cambridge in my years in Oxford and I didn't see the same kind of radicalism on the streets.

**AD:** I think that's really extraordinary.

**GS:** This is an outsider's take but that's how it seemed. I'm thinking of the ripple effect from organizations like Oxford Revolutionary Socialist Students and JACARI [the anti-apartheid group]. But it was an absolute blip. I went back in about 1974 and it had entirely reverted to a more staid atmosphere. I would willingly concede that there was this extraordinary poetic activity going on in Cambridge at the time which I was largely unaware of and which I have relished ever since. I have enjoyed going to the various Cambridge Poetry Conferences and so on and I have many more poetry links with people who have emerged from Cambridge. I think one needs to acknowledge that maybe a looser way of being emerged in Cambridge, probably in the Thirties. Maybe it's a more Wordsworthian tradition, whereas Oxford is more Coleridgean somehow. Leavis was one of the people I heard at York. He used to come up once a week, run about the huge artificial lake to get fit and give a lecture. Maybe that whole trust in natural patterns of speech which Wordsworth argued for in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* was more taken up by Cambridge. I would associate Oxford more with Gerard Manley Hopkins and that highly textured verse, experimental though it is, and actually partly going against an oral tradition.

**AD:** If people have been imitating him they haven't been very successful. Maybe religion is the problem. He was a sort of classic High Anglican. It's been a religious vortex rather than a poetic one.

**GS:** I think it would be a mistake to imitate Hopkins these days, but he remains a marker for what can be done in craft particularly in terms of poetic diction, in terms of vigorous sounds and just reclaiming words that some people would regard as inkhorn terms but become very active and of the moment in Hopkins. I imagine Geraldine Monk has been very influenced by Hopkins in terms of sound patterns,

**AD:** Good grief!

**GS:** And maybe Maggie O'Sullivan too.

**AD:** All I can remember is Peter Levi saying in an interview that it was natural for an English Catholic poet to write like Hopkins, and then not explaining very clearly why he didn't. He was very aware of being 100% non-Hopkins. I suppose they were both Jesuits. English Jesuits aren't really all that numerous, are they?

**GS:** Unless you go back to the Renaissance. A person that I'd heard about in Cambridge although I didn't meet her at the time was Elaine Feinstein. She was clearly a key figure on that scene. Being in touch with Charles Olson and organising events, editing that magazine with Prynne and others.

**AD:** *Prospect*. Back to Olson. I wanted to ask about azimuth and binnacle and whether the

navigation theme had to do with Olson.

**GS:** I've always been a great reader of voyage literature, Hakluyt for example, and always loved going by sea. I went to North America at the beginning of 1968 by a cargo ship from Liverpool to Boston, and as a boy I used to go mackerel fishing in Cornwall. I've been on all kinds of water expeditions and am, incidentally, a water sign. I got quite fascinated with aspects of navigation. So it's the history of moving around from place to place by water and the ways in which people navigate it. Like Olson I suppose I took that as an emblem. Making 'azimuth' the book title is more emphatic. I'm sure I did know about the word from physics or astronomy, but I may have first come across it in an in-depth way with the Pink Floyd. When I went to a concert of theirs on the South Bank in the late 1960s, they used something called an 'azimuth projector', as a way of distributing sound around the hall.

**AD:** So it wasn't realistic stereo, it was deliberately altered and directed?

**GS:** I was never a lover of quadraphonic systems, but I think in a hall there are strong arguments for doing something like that. I must have read in NME, or maybe *IT* or *Frendz*, about the Azimuth Co-ordinator. Probably Roger Waters would have been holding forth about it. I think they were still using it when I went to see them perform 'Dark Side of the Moon' at the Rainbow at the beginning of 1972. Nowadays people regard things like *Tommy* and *Dark Side of the Moon* as cliched and programmatic in a dull predictable way, but at the time those pieces came out they were tremendously exciting. That *Dark* concert took place six months before the album came out. I suppose I'm mainly interested in earlier Floyd stuff, but the timbre of sound at the Rainbow show, in that setting, was extraordinary, and similarly the light show etcetera. So perhaps I absorbed something of a contemporary sound context for *Azimuth* from the Floyd's Azimuth Co-ordinator. But I didn't decide on the title for that book—although by 1978 it had already become a long poem project—until I went to visit John Robinson, of *Joe DiMaggio*, in Bounds Green, and he played me this LP...

**AD:** ... an exhibit here [LP called *Azimuth* by Azimuth with a photo of the ocean on its cover].

**GS:** ... which had just come out. Which initially I thought was just called 'Azimuth', but it's truer to say this is a group called Azimuth. It's chamber jazz music. It's just a trio: John Taylor on piano and synthesizer, Norma Winstone, voice, and Kenny Wheeler the great Canadian trumpeter on trumpet and flugelhorn. It says released in March 1977 but I know I couldn't have heard this until 1978. There's a lighthouse on the cover, and a lot of these pieces seemed to have the sea or a direction connotation. 'Siren's Song' opens it and then 'O' [or nought] leads into the title track. On side B you have 'The Tunnel', 'Greek Triangle' and 'Naked'. When John played this I was mesmerised to find a song called Azimuth, and I already knew two of the musicians, that is, on record, particularly Norma Winstone. Her first album *Edge of Time* influenced my sense of possible structure a lot because it proceeds from chaos to a sort of lullaby at the end and it showed how furor could be joined with a more settled melodic quietness. *Edge of Time* I would think was about 1972. The thing about Norma Winstone, and this happens on the Joe Harriott album *Hum Dono*, which would be something like 1969, is: she sings as an instrument—as the equivalent of a saxophone or whatever. Norma Winstone is one of my heroines and I've stayed with her over the years. She's also on *Labyrinth*, the Nucleus album, which I still find inventive. I heard Ian Carr's group in various incarnations, in Oxford among other places. Winstone sings the part of Ariadne in this suite which is based on the Theseus and the Minotaur story. With this striking cover.

**AD:** Not really in keeping. Were they on Vertigo? They were trying to sell that kind of thing to a pop audience. Interjecting for the new reader, Norma Winstone was I believe a free jazz vocalist, so completely different from vocalists like Billie Holiday. I guess part of this was to do with producing an English jazz style, it had to purge an awful lot to cease being American at one

remove. So improvisation was a big part of it. Most modern poetry comes out of music and this is most obvious with rather banal poetry, it's oriented towards pop song lyrics, people are so used to that. The banality of the lyrics becomes the banality of the poetry. But modern style poetry hasn't really escaped from music, as a welcoming warm and liberated environment. But modern-style poetry has a home in very modern-style music, of which English free jazz and chamber jazz are examples.

**GS:** There is a poem towards the end called 'Azimuth' which is dedicated to Norma Winstone, whom I finally met after a concert at the Drill Hall in the early 80s. I didn't reprint this in my *Selected* because it doesn't seem to work fully now, but I think I still stand by it. It's about four, five poems from the end:

'This I know to be my way  
plotted first by the wind-rose and the stars  
then by arcs of declination intersected'

**AD:** Could I interject there, this is a guess, that the interest of navigational terms for free jazz was not to do with getting from a known place to a known place. It was actually about being in the middle of the ocean, and you invent your own geography, and your own course, and the point is not losing confidence in what you're doing. Could I suggest that in *Azimuth* the relation with the Pink Floyd sound projection thing is to get away from point and towards an area, *Azimuth* is a very complicated poem and you could say it has a centre in a dozen different places.

**GS:** I'm glad you brought things back to the aleatory and the non-predictable, because that is my orientation. I got distracted by the concept and the programmatic. I think dislocation—not knowing where you are and having to find your way by whatever means are available, or plotting a course that goes in a circuitous way, a way that includes mishaps and mistakes—is what I was interested in. Although such openness is particularly pronounced in Olson, the long poem traditionally includes digression. Homer, for instance. The long poem, not just the modernist long poem, usually has this twisting vitality. Narrative tends to encourage these fluid, chance or stray elements. But Olson was an inspiration for me in showing how you could utilise diverse materials within a longer text. If you think of the variousness of *The Maximus Poems*, the use of Algonquin mythology, Jung, along with actual voyage journals and narratives. That combination of historical texts with oral legends, their exact status open. Of course it's also the combination of text and observations—walking the streets of Gloucester and nearby territory: Dogtown, Gravelly Hill, Stage Fort et cetera. This creates a kind of sliding reality. I think indeterminacy is vital. I mentioned in my email to you that remark of Keats to Reynolds: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself but with its subject.' And then a little bit later on he says 'I don't mean to deny Wordsworth's grandeur, [. . .] but I mean to say we need not be teased with grandeur & merit when we can have them uncontaminated and unobtrusive.' Keats is rather out of fashion these days. But that opposition to palpable design is a crucial stance. I suppose it's a truism of Romanticism really, that you don't trust what has come down as a blueprint, you forge your own path, your own meaning. That said, obviously all poets do use design, however free they are. You can't get completely away from design.

**AD:** So improvisation has its intent. But its outcome may be something that has genuinely shed all genre rules, and a whole tier of consciously known rules, perhaps not all rules of language ever memorised or internalised but a significant part of them. The converse of this is the claim often made that the audience can't understand modern poetry, which in a sneaky way does prove that

poetry has gone beyond. Got away from itself.

**GS:** This may not be directly responding to what you just said, but I think you raised something that preoccupies me: a procedure that moves beyond semantics or which contains a pure sound dimension. I'm interested in this because I'm on the one hand fascinated by commentary and critical interpretations of texts and on the other hand always wanting to return to the text in a purer way. I remember Peter Riley, in his essay in *Poets on Writing*, saying something to the effect that the poem says what it means starkly and the reader is left with that. Poetry says what it says in stark isolation leaving you to make sense of it. This would involve getting away from any appendages, so that the reader finds their way through the text without a crutch, without interpretative props. I think that's a well made point even though I'm fascinated by commentaries such as you get in Sandys' 17th century translation of Ovid where you get marginal glosses and annotation at the end of each book. Even though I'm fascinated by that and always have been, I love footnotes. Ultimately you get back to the fabric of the text and it goes beyond meaning in any detachable sense. The content is in the form as Olson said, quoting Creeley, Actually, the statement in *Projective Verse* is 'Form is never more than an extension of content.' But Creeley develops this in *A Quick Graph*: 'The poem is not a signboard, pointing to a content ultimately to be regarded. . . It is the way a poem speaks, not the matter, that proves its effect'. The elements are not really separable. We have to negotiate the fabric of the language—ah we're back to 'Azimuth' bearings—in grappling with a poem and coming to a sense of what it means. There is an interesting passage in Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie* in which he contrasts the art of prose and poetry: 'The utterance in prose is not of so great efficacy, because not only [is it] daily used, and by that occasion the ear is over-glutted with it, but is also not so voluble and slipper upon the tongue, being wide and loose and nothing numerous, nor contrived into measures and sounded with so gallant and harmonical accents, nor in fine, allowed that figurative conveyance nor so great licence in choice of words and phrases as metre is.' Metre there suggests a very arranged or stress-based form of poetry but I think he is suggesting that poetry has the capacity at least to move onto a purer level of language because it's not so worn. Would you say, Andrew, this is opposite to Wordsworth's emphasis on. . .

**AD:** It's not quite symmetrical. He is talking about freedom, and I have to say that modern prose doesn't have quite the qualities he attributes to it, as 16th century prose did, also not all poetry fits into that scheme although it's a very beautiful idea. I think the Objectivists were pretty much marching in the opposite direction.

**GS:** It's important to bear in mind the historical development of these genres, and Melville's prose for instance is poetry at some level, isn't it. Maybe I've reverted to talking about arrangement as opposed to spontaneity and irregularity. But I think there is a level at which poetry transcends meaning—certainly in the detachable sense—and I don't think you get that so much in prose, although you could argue that any passage of Joyce and Beckett, or goodness even Iain Sinclair now, moves beyond. All poetry is sound poetry at some level, even though the term tends to be used to apply to an extreme of that.

**AD:** We seem to have defined freedom there, which is very satisfying. I'd like to say that it's not just the poet who enjoys the feeling of freedom and lack of constraint, but the reader as well. The reader is either adrift in this sea of language or swimming, buoyed up by it like a fish in water. I think that's what the Azimuth idea is all about. I suppose it's not the rules of prose which are restrictive, it's the attitude of some readers.

**GS:** Things go back to how, as a reader, you approach the text, and this is subject to all the variables of experience. You might read something differently on a train from how you would in the privacy of your living room, and you might read something differently performing it, compared to silent reading. I sent you my statement on poetry which was part of my entry on the

British Electronic Poetry Site until this got deleted by mistake. [It's now on the Archive of the Now site.] In that I argue for a reclaiming of rhetoric, on the assumption that rhetoric in the true sense is not deceptive or artificial but is literally the best words in the best order. OK, Cicero and so on may have been thinking mainly of argument but rhetoric also involves description and patterns of, the shaping of phrases within a sentence or beyond a sentence. My defence of rhetoric is I think relevant to my procedures in *Roxy*, where I've got a kind of dialectic going on between the regular, the formulaic and the dispersal of intention. In that statement I was saying that sometimes nowadays the experimental becomes a kind of mantra, an obsessive mantra whereby the poet is supposed to shed traditional forms and planned arrangements, and I think rhetoric in the sense of recourse to tried and tested patterns, or useful patterns, is still fundamental to poetry, and people don't want to admit that.

**AD:** I'd like to say that the academic line which was predominant in the 1950s and came out of close reading tended to make rhetoric a very dirty word and close reading often seemed to be going through the poem and finding all the devices of rhetoric and sort of red circling them and saying no NoNoNo. It does strike me that one part of the experimental line you mentioned is just taking that two steps further. There seems to be a lack of understanding that this comes out of practical criticism and the academic conventions of the Fifties. It's just an extension of it. You were talking about the aural and performance, and Cicero as a courtroom lawyer and politician was if nothing else delivering orally and performing, and if you like delivering lies. The impulses of performance naturally give rise to rhetoric, I don't think you can separate the two.

**GS:** So the rules which he formulated, if you like, were in the bloodstream from his daily work practice. Should we bring the focus back to my books? In your essay on *Azimuth* you expressed considerable reservations if not hostility to *Tilting Square*, my second book of sonnets, and I think this could be germane to the area we were just talking about. In that book I am very sensitive to pattern, and I combine fixity with fluid elements. I'm on the one hand trying to construct a series of interlinked units, and on the other hand moving literally in reaction to what is happening around me and not being predetermined. Those two books came out of my life at the time. *Elizabethan Overhang* comes mainly out of a love affair although I am not just dealing with the subjective. There are more general poems here that intersect with the directly personal. The opening poem ['Make-Up'] is much to do with language as well as the expression of feeling within a relationship. 'First Born' is to do with being first born, the first in a family. 'Tundale' is about the danger of AIDS at one level, and from a heterosexual position. Certainly when I went out to America in 1988 it was a threat to heterosexuals as well. 'Delayed Release' concerns what's happened to the ideals of the 1960s. 'Less and More' engages with the issue of 'the new man', pretty topical in the 1980s. I was just making a qualification there, to the point that both books come out of the personal. Let me grab *Tilting Square*. This juxtaposes an affair I was having with someone who at the time was still married but who subsequently left her husband, with the death of my father which happened during that period. See section 4 which also contains poems about the rest of my family, including my mother. The structure of the book is based literally on the *Tilting Square* images I drew at the time. Or those visual designs suggest what was also emerging in language. The cover has the design for section 1, with the tip of a pyramid picked out in gold. Actually gold leaf, hugely expensive. This begins a sequence of straight-line shapes within a turning circle. The initial square within a circle is an envelope but also, because of that tip, an incipient pyramid, realized fully in the design for section 5. The intermediate designs feature different configurations, including zigzag or "vanishing" parts. I suppose the point of that was different configurations within a relationship, or a family, and in society. To some degree this is highly organised and thought out. I think the envelope suggests poems sent by letter, which many of them were, secretly. And the circle, which may also be a ball, could imply energy flow. The

images are playful and a serious plotting of life-patterns. In a general way they were inspired by Paul Klee's notes on related shapes and colours in *The Thinking Eye*. I think he's particularly concerned with figuration in movement, the dynamics of the line. I must get back to the point at issue. Didn't you react adversely to what you saw as a stiffness of language? Obviously I'm using the sonnet here. I think I could stick my neck out and say that in the *Reality Street Book of Sonnets* mine are among the few which are genuine sonnets. I'm not in any way objecting to the material in that anthology. I think it's a wonderful anthology. What I was trying to do in both these books was to stay close to the Elizabethan and Jacobean, and extend it through to the 17th century and even to the Caroline. That phase of very intense sonnet-writing, although most of the sequences come from the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. I was trying to find an equivalent to that. The fourteen-line form in a sequence whereby motifs are picked up, recapitulated and you get that whole interpenetration between different texts. I was trying to retain that but to find a way of doing it afresh. After Barthes, Derrida and feminist theory—I mean with an awareness of such thinking, not imitation. And, poetically, with a sense of what had been done later, from Barrett Browning and Meredith through to Cummings, Empson and Berryman. I can now be detached about it and see that I am simply putting too many words into a given text of fourteen lines or into the line. I think Andrew Crozier told me off for doing that, or implied that the lines were too stuffed.

**AD:** I found it very hard to understand but perhaps a re-reading would have taken care of that. All three of the ones you mentioned seem a lot clearer now. Sorry, who is Tundale?

**GS:** It's a mediaeval text.

**AD:** *The Vision of Tundale? Visio Tnugdali* in mediaeval Latin?

**GS:** Yes, this includes a vision of the damned, which may have influenced Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the triptych in the Prado.

**AD:** It's related to *The Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot* but with a different hero. It is the same voyage. AIDS has to do with paradise lost?

**GS:** I think perhaps a nightmare journey which confronts you with difficulties. But yes, that would link with other poems, particularly the one in *Elizabethan Overhang* about the 1960s and the effects of that, 'Delayed Release'.

**AD:** It's on the facing page.

**GS:** There's obviously a degree of intentionality there. These poems, as well as negotiating that fourteen-line thing, and occasionally using rhyme, are an attempt to grapple with and resolve paradoxes. It's the configuration thing again. The poem 'Numbers', in *Tilting Square*, concerns the relative advantages and disadvantages of being in a couple and being single, and just deals with the look of numbers, which are I think very suggestive. One being a straight form rising upwards, and two being a curved form which may go down and end flatly, or rise up into a curve. If you look at the first stanza.

**AD:** 'One stands up and two leans back. . .'

**GS:** I think I'm wrestling with ethical problems, with physiological problems. These poems were driven by a need to make sense of what was happening at a philosophical level. Maybe the piled-up language comes partly from the fact that I was pressurised but also from this need to think things out in that pressurised situation. The philosophical implications of emotional business. Poems that concern the act of writing ['Make-Up', 'Business and Origin'] juxtapose two levels of effort or involvement, and those that deal with the position of the poet ['Parnassus' and 'Utility'] contrast or draw parallels between the professional and domestic. Longing, attainment, dislodgement.

**AD:** I think what caused me problems was wondering whether it was a sonnet sequence about one situation with the same two people in so that there is a carry-over of meaning between the

different poems. Or whether they were really separate. I think they are quite separate from each other so the problem was perhaps imaginary.

**GS:** But they are cumulative in terms of theme and effect. As with my long poems the sequences here involve many connections. Some of them would be chance connections obviously. I went through a long period of listening intensively to Renaissance airs, particularly, madrigals too, and using Renaissance song-books, anthologies of sonnets, as back-up.

**AD:** So we're back with music again!

**GS:** These come out of the experience of listening to composers like Michael East and John Wilbye. For instance, 'You meaner beauties of the night' and 'Draw on, sweet night'. I was particularly fond of Emma Kirkby's record *Time Stands Still* and Camerata of London's *English Ayres and Duets*. Also the tenor John Elwes. I taped a mass of material from Radio 3 in the 70s and 80s, and my then-colleague Roderick Swanston copied performances of all of Dowland's airs for me. There are poems on Gibbons and Byrd in *Music's Duel*. My take on the sonnet is different from, say, Creeley's reworking of the Campion mode, in that I strive for something more metaphysical. Unlike most songs the language is almost clotted, it's very dense. Whereas with true songs you're getting more of a lyric simplicity.

**AD:** I think all modern poets were going through something like this in the 1980s. There seemed to be this fetish of titling something "song", Denise does that, when you couldn't possibly sing it. If it were going to be in a song it would already be there in a song by Campion or Lawes or whoever. The whole point of being a modern poet is that you have been locked out of that paradise and you succeed if you accept that state. So we've got that very exciting new music of the 1960s which has ebbed rather decisively. We've got free jazz, which is almost not there, it's the taste of freedom, out in the ocean. And we've got the Renaissance. None of those actually gives you a way of writing poetry. You have to write it as poetry.

**GS:** I've got two reactions to what you've just said. But winding back to what we were saying a little earlier, taking forms beyond what they were in their literal context. You mentioned Denise Riley. Coleridge would be an earlier example here with his adaptation of the ballad form for 'The Ancient Mariner'.

**AD:** You couldn't possibly sing that. There is that spooky quality with Coleridge. Then there's 'Christabel' which you could sing. As pastiche it's impossibly good. Incredible. But he couldn't do it consistently, we're talking about two poems in the whole of his lifetime.

**GS:** He is faithful to the line and stanza pattern of the ballad and to its usual subject context. He is faithful to both of those but does a vast expansion. In the second edition with the marginal gloss as well. So that's one example I wanted to flag up, suggesting the successful expansion of an old form. When I look at *Tilting Square* now and this piled-up, concentrated language, it seems to me that people like Tony Lopez were doing similar things then in terms of density. It must have been something to do with the British cultural climate, but maybe also the influence of LANGUAGE poetry. Getting away from the oral in a strict sense, that "speech act" which Robert Grenier and others found so suspect. I suppose Prynne's redefinition of the lyric mode was particularly crucial for British poets at this time.

**AD:** What was the other point you said you wanted to make?

**GS:** Well, you said 'You have to write it as poetry'. I agree, but isn't it still a negotiation with aspects of music, even if it's dissonant and fragmented? I've referred to a complexity of interlocking ideas and images that take these sonnets away from what is typical in song. But I'm aware that I was still influenced by, say, John Renbourne's setting of the Donne song 'Go and catch a falling star', which I heard him perform with Doris Henderson in the 1960s. I set another Donne poem to music, 'Sweetest love, I do not go', around 1970. Neither of these is a sonnet, I'm thinking of lyric patterns. The melodic line offers fluency with a degree of breakage. This stuff is

in my bloodstream and, while I don't wish to repeat what's been practised to death, I like using a model to bounce off. You can set up contrary impulses and conflicting rhythms within a tightly knit or restricted form. It creates tension between the predictable and the uncertain. Going back to the LANGUAGE poetry quarrel with directly oral discourse, this seems to have been part of a reaction against the assumed subject position—the beak of the ego which Olson tried to get away from, with middle voice and so on. I'm slightly eliding the dogmatic with the subjective here. Anyway, Perelman and Bernstein found many of the Olson generation or tradition still culpable in this respect. So you get a shift away from what is, in some ways, still a lyric voice. There is more emphasis on the construction of personality.

**AD:** Am I not right in thinking that the essential feature of the sonnet sequence was that it was amazingly egocentric and that was part of a Renaissance revolution which was, I suppose, minimising the power of religion. There was no earlier equivalent for extensive poetic works with that degree of egocentricity.

**GS:** It was highly subjective in terms of romantic experience but that is distanced somewhat by convention, isn't it, as the tropes of Petrarch are recycled endlessly. In England Wyatt did something very individual with the sonnet. However dependent he is on Italian and, in some cases, French sources, there's an absolutely unique forging of language and a refusal to be limited by convention.

**AD:** You could say that being revolutionary was linked to being individualist. . .

**GS:** Well, all these categories are relative. Take the Romantic and the Augustan. You might think there is a generalising tendency in Augustan verse as against Romantic but once you start rereading the work you find those assumptions are only true to a point. I should put it on record that there was a third book of sonnets which I never finished. I think four of them appear in *Music's Duel*. I have other poems from that third sequence but I was never quite happy with it and I didn't finish it. It is something I've worked at quite a bit over the years. Although those three books were written in close succession actually, even the third one dates from the 1990s. In a way there's an attempt to do it again in a sequence I started writing which involved what I call the blues sonnet. I called the sequence 'Short Takes', but having written about four of them I decided to draw a line. It wasn't quite working.

**AD:** Four examples isn't bad for a new genre.

**GS:** Half of that "stub" is in *Music's Duel*, page 294. Robert Hampson asked for poems for an issue of *Purge* to mark the passing of the Blair era and I sent him these two poems but I don't think that issue was ever published.

**AD:** No. People found it hard writing about Blair because he was so slippery he was barely there.

**GS:** So they're kind of blues sonnets. I decided really that they were rather convoluted. But I didn't want to disown them so they're here. But they might mystify people because there's so much piled in there. It might be fun one day to do a detailed explication of them because they're very dense indeed.

**AD:** 'Policy Blues'. Does the policy refer to Blair?

**GS:** At the political level, yes. But as the note at the bottom says, 'Policy: a daily lottery in which participants bet that certain numbers will be drawn from a lottery wheel'.

**AD:** Hence numbers runners.

**GS:** 'Policy Blues' is the title of a blues song. As well as being very interested in folk song, I am heavily into the blues. [Lurches over to a shelf containing rare and weighty books.] This amazing series is a useful resource: transcribed lyrics of blues songs as collected and put out on Document Records.

**AD:** Exhibit. Large Bible-like cloth volumes.

**GS:** There are about ten or twelve volumes I think. I was in correspondence with this chap.

Unfortunately he never finished the project. Robert [Bob] Macleod.

**AD:** Robert 'Honeyboy' Macleod.

**GS:** He was based in Edinburgh and the transcriptions of songs are more accurate than other versions. These volumes are the real Macleod, although he did do further electronic revisions. The files were too big for my old computer! After listening to blues on record for years I was able to absorb and decipher the texts more easily via these marvellous transcriptions. He'd found a way of slowing down the listening experience so that words which were sung very fast became clearer. And using the treadle of a sewing-machine table, connected to the deck, he could stop at any point. It was some kind of Heath Robinson device.

**AD:** So he could vary the speed of the motor on the turntable? I'm wondering if this is linked to other Scottish folklore projects like Hamish Henderson.

**GS:** I suppose it was a parallel one, involving another oral culture. Some of Henderson's own songs—'Farewell to Sicily' and 'The Taxi Driver's Cap' for instance—have acquired near-traditional status, so similar transmission issues are thrown up. Besides the folklore aspect, I'm interested in Henderson's war poetry.

**AD:** You said to me, I've lost the details because it was in the pub, but you pointed out that you had a link to the 1940s which wasn't in my book about the links between the Forties and the Sixties.

**GS:** And I didn't say what it was?

**AD:** You did but I've forgotten.

**GS:** Anyway, to go back to those sonnets, I was using the blues idiom to analyse or describe a cultural era. There is reference to the Millennium Dome, which was a Heseltine/Major project before being taken up by Blair & Co. It's a rather emblematic overlap of grandiose fluff, faith in a hollow shell.

**AD:** One of the important themes we have to tackle this afternoon is the cultural scene in York in the 70s.

**GS:** This brings me to theatre and the intersection between the various arts in the 1960s and 1970s. I moved up to York in, I think it must have been, 1973 and was there until the end of the summer in 1978. As an Oxford graduate, I now encountered a department [at York University] almost entirely staffed by ex-Cambridge people. In fact I used to refer to it as "Cambridge in the North". But that isn't what you were asking me about, I suspect. In terms of poetry. . . I mentioned theatre because I had two girlfriends in my time in York, one was Jill [Florent] and she accompanied me back to London in 1978. Jill knew Richard Drain, a lecturer whose specialist field was modern drama, everything through to Robert Wilson and the Living Theatre and so on. Richard directed various plays in which Jill appeared. Some of them involved jazz musicians as well. Jill had been taught by the poet Frances Horowitz, Michael's wife, and through that network I got to meet people like Lol Coxhill and Jeff Nuttall, whom I'd probably heard prior to that. This was a more revelatory encounter, particularly a gig they did at Theatre Royal, York, after which they came back and stayed at the big communal house I had in a village four miles outside York, Haxby. Ash Tree House was one of a number of communes throughout the country, linked on the grapevine, where people would come and stay and vice versa. That encounter was enormously fruitful even though it was short-lived: just 24 hours. We talked a great deal about poetry and music. I think that fed into my visits to London. I must have gone to Compendium [bookshop] way back, around the time it started, which is where I picked up *Archaeologist of Morning* for instance. Maybe 1970? I'm a bit hazy on dates. But it was perhaps through some of those contacts at York that I went forward in my pursuit of what was happening over here and re-engaged with Barry MacSweeney and so on. But there's an Olson connection through Tony Ward, one of the lecturers at York. I got on well with him and his wife, Nicole Ward Jouve. He lent me tapes of

Olson reading at Berkeley and Vancouver, the latter an absolute marathon. The Berkeley tape featured readings by Duncan, Wieners and Creeley as well. There was also H. D. [Hilda Doolittle] reading *Helen in Egypt*, from another source, and an interview with Pound. All this was illuminating. The tapes came from copies held at Essex University, with which Tony maintained contact. I borrowed a reel to reel recorder and, using a link, transferred them to cassette. Not only did these tapes prove absolutely revelatory in terms of the voicing of words on the page and bringing that poetry alive, but they helped forge links with people in the decade following. I got hold of those tapes in 1974 or possibly 1975. I had the largest room in a big farmhouse and used to sit in the middle of the floor with headphones, listening to these things. I was ridiculed somewhat for this obsession but it was part of a lot of strange behaviour in that era. Subsequently this opened up a network: I met people who didn't have these tapes, did copies for them, and meshed more easily with the scene that I encountered on returning to London in autumn 1978. The King's College scene, SubVoicive and the rest is history. I've mentioned drama and the connection we felt at the time between all these activities, including film and dance, which were linked in a way that does not seem so pronounced now. Jill and I did a series of workshops with the Living Theatre in London in 1979, which involved a restaging of *Prometheus at the Winter Palace*, a reworking of the original Living Theatre's *Storming of the Winter Palace* but with an added dimension. As well as doing these workshops at the Roundhouse, we went to all night vigil cum poetry events, poetry drama events outside Holloway and Pentonville prisons. Walking along the streets of London and staging happenings. In summoning back my York days, I still haven't said a lot about contacts in the British poetry world but my goodness they came in a very intense and energised way in 1978. I feel maybe I lived my life backwards for a time, discovering when and where things happened, filling in all the slots. I felt my way back to the inner circumstance and origin of some of the Fulcrum and Trigram books by British poets that I'd acquired earlier in the decade. I remember Indica bookshop and Better Books, but I didn't go to many events there, not most of the things from the late 60s and 70s that people talk about. Still, I could almost imagine that I'd been there at the core.

**AD:** Sort of an injection of memory? A DNA transfer? This does seem to be the classic thing in the British poetry scene. Apart from the ones who were already there, in say 1965, people coming along later have had this kind of flashback, backstory, catching up, so that there is a shared history even though they weren't really there. This was certainly true for me, seems to be true for people much younger than me. There should be a word for it.

**GS:** I suppose it's a kind of vicarious identification or inhabitation. False memory in a wholesome sense. Absolutely, my experience is yours in that respect. I think I was writing in something of a vacuum in the 1970s, when I was in York. A lot of the poems that went into *Azimuth* of course come from that date. Yet some were rewritten or even created retrospectively, that is in the period 1978-1984. The poem for Alan Halsey is placed earlier than the year of our first meeting. I met him first at the Whitechapel Book Fair. It was in the building next door to Whitechapel Art Gallery. Perhaps it was the library next door. And there's a poem in *Azimuth* for Alan, which deals with 17th Century Dissenter activity, Diggers and Ranters, and references St George's Hill. I think that poem probably existed in an earlier form but it was rewritten with a dedication to Alan, further investigation of that territory, the Ranter-Digger activity, for which we both shared an enthusiasm. I'd like to comment further on my experience of poetry other than traditional, in the 1960s. When I went to boarding school in 1962 I discovered a small core of people who had a kind of secret knowledge of blues and folk music. I started listening to Leadbelly and Dylan and so on, comparatively early compared to other people I know. That exposure to Leadbelly partly accounts for the poem 'Bottle Up and Go' in *Days of '49*. Likewise my experience of alternative poetry, or a different kind of tradition, relates to the paradox of attending a very militaristic

school, Haileybury, which had the CCF tradition and sports tradition, and so on.

**AD:** Combined Cadet Force.

**GS:** Some of the activities were very scary. I was injured for life playing rugby, was nearly paralysed in fact by a kick in the spine, and I've had back problems ever since. The assault courses and the expeditions we went on in Northumberland for instance, were extremely arduous. But the school had a strong classical tradition, musical tradition—that was where I first heard madrigal. It also had an extremely good classics department. My first Headmaster there was a classics teacher who wrote me an extraordinary letter when I got the scholarship. Within this conservative institution there were particular maverick figures, for instance the English teacher I had for three years, until the end of O-level, a man called Basil Edwards. I think Basil says it all really! Who encouraged us from a very early age to go and see Continental films in London, at the Academy. . .

**AD:** . . . Oxford Street.

**GS:** . . . Bergman, Antonioni, and so forth, but also encouraged us to get into Beat poetry. Maybe it came through my interest in Bob Dylan, but the curiosity had been instilled. Anyway, in 1966—as inscribed here—I acquired this little book called *Beat Poets* published by Studio Vista, and amazingly it features Ed Dorn. Not a very representative selection of poems but nonetheless an eye-opener. Let's see. It includes 'A Fate of Unannounced Years' and 'When the Fairies', which begins 'When the fairies come back to Santa Fe, they sit in dark caverns, called taverns'.

**AD:** He may have been right about that!

**GS:** I might not have caught the drift then. Whalen, Wieners, LeRoi Jones are here. There's an extract from Kerouac's *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*. It was through reading this that I went in search of *Mexico City Blues*. Although it's a tiny book, it's quite an all-encompassing short take, which energised me and provided signals. Then in 1967 I was given, as part of the Le Fanu History Prize—note the name—some volumes of Penguin Modern Poets. These were supplementary to the main prize, probably a history hardback. It's possible that I chose these titles. Here is *Penguin Modern Poets 5*: Corso, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg. That's number 9: Levertov, Rexroth, Williams. Another, which I may have lost, was the Liverpool Poets. A few years later I acquired the David Gascoyne, W. S. Graham, Kathleen Raine volume, that's *PMP 17*, published in 1970. It's the Graham material that stands out: 'Malcolm Mooney's Land', 'The Constructed Space', 'The Voyages of Alfred Wallis', 'The Thermal Stair', almost my favourite poem.

**AD:** About Peter Lanyon?

**GS:** Yes. 'Hilton Abstract', 'The Fifteen Devices', 'Clusters Travelling Out', where he's getting heavily involved in the analysis of language, although it had always been a preoccupation. What appealed to me so much about 'Thermal Stair' was the direct address, almost disembodied, 'I called today, Peter, and you were away', yes because he was dead. It's such a beautifully casual opening. It's so poignant. I could cry about this poem. It reminds me about people I care about who are no longer here, especially painters and poets. The image of the thermal which was literally the gliding activity that Peter Lanyon was involved with and then used as a device in his painting, or a way of approaching painting. This just bowled me over, and Graham is still an inspiration to me. Funnily enough in the kitchen at the moment I've got a tape which Kelvin Corcoran gave me—years ago—of Graham reading. I understand there are a number of bootleg tapes in circulation. This is just Graham and his wife, Nessie Dunsmuir, and I think Ronnie Duncan. It's a very moving record. He does 'Approaches to How They Behave' which is an extraordinary investigation of how perceptions find verbal expression, with slips, twists or whatever. More specifically it wrestles with the nature of poetry. After that he reads 'Dear Bryan Wynter', another elegy that uses direct address. Then finally 'Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch', where he speaks to the watch and the watch replies. I think it's after the Bryan Wynter poem that

Graham suddenly has anxieties about it being too much of a performance and says No, it was too emotional, too rhetorical. And Nessie responds by saying, No, it was true to your feeling. It's kind of massaging him, calming him: no, you did it in a way that is true. Graham hit me very early on and then I came back to him in the 1980s when he was getting quite fashionable again, partly through Tony Lopez's book. Apparently Jeremy Prynne triggered this research topic by handing Tony a copy of the *Graham Collected* [published 1979].

**AD:** Yes the critical book is Edinburgh University Press, but Tony did his thesis at Caius. I had assumed that he turned up with a thesis subject all ready.

**GS:** Prynne asked Tony what he thought of the work and he was hooked right away.

**AD:** This raises the possibility that the Forties British poets are the generation before the Beats.

**GS:** In terms of Fitzrovia especially. But obviously you meant it in a further sense.

**AD:** Would the Beats have happened without Dylan Thomas? I don't think so.

**GS:** You mean Dylan Thomas in New York in particular, rather than Fitzrovia?

**AD:** Dylan Thomas roaming the countryside drinking a great deal and reaching big audiences.

**GS:** I could talk about the 1940s in more detail. You just said to me over lunch that there was some connection with the 1940s in my life which I told you about and which I've forgotten. This probably isn't it, but my father was in the Eighth Army with Keith Douglas, knew him and read the work. I used to dip into my father's copy of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, which is now in that bookcase. Another source I used, briefly, for *Days of '49*—in the Egypt text. I still have a fair amount of time for Keith Douglas even though he's not typical of the 1940s. I've long felt that the war poetry of the Forties is more successful than the poetry written at the front during the First World War. Having defended rhetoric an hour ago, I would qualify that now by saying that Wilfred Owen for me is too rhetorical, even though they're great poems in their way. And I can understand why Yeats left Owen out of his *Oxford Anthology of Modern Verse*, although that's a distortion. He shouldn't have put in all the minor poets that he did, instead.

**AD:** It's a crazy book, it's a personal statement but it doesn't really have that solidity of chronicling what was really happening.

**GS:** I like the comparative quietness of the Second World War poetry and the greater feeling of the ephemeral. It just seems much less forced. That's more a Cambridge than an Oxford tradition, going back to what we were saying. Douglas' 'Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden' is an effective, highly organised poem. The way he uses enjambment, progressing from the first stanza to the second: 'Slily red lip on the spoon//slips in a morsel of ice-cream'. It's an exercise, types of person as fishes or fishes as types of person. Carefully observed, I think. Because my father had served there, I could vicariously identify with these poems from the North African campaign. The Robin Skelton anthology *Poetry of the Forties*, which I'm holding, is a more satisfactory selection than the *Thirties* one, although they're both skilfully constructed. Skelton includes a fair number of poems from the domestic or home front. J. F. Hendry's 'London Before Invasion: 1940' contrasts nicely with Mervyn Peake's 'London 1941'. Other than Graham who I've mentioned, all sorts of people interest me here. These are people who I might normally rule out of my Parnassus of important figures. Alun Lewis. Did he write this ['Corfe Castle'] when he was with Lynnette Roberts, I wonder? When I say with, I mean illicitly so. Ruthven Todd, whose book *Tracks in the Snow* I admire, for its reassessment of Blake, Fuseli and John Martin [the painter]. Bernard Spencer, although these don't represent his best work. He wrote interestingly about boats, though less adventurously than Graham. I like Spencer's casual-seeming fidelity to experience, mediated through precision of form. Born at the tail end of the Forties, I couldn't have a memory of that decade in the literal sense. My earliest memories would be from age two or three. But I can resituate myself vicariously. This is what Alan and I did in *Days of '49*, we re-investigated the decade that we were the product of, or you could say investigated it from afar in retrospect. With

the important qualification—or extension—that we were looking through the lens both ways. I suppose we began writing the book in 1997 or 98. Although the project concerned a specific year or era, we were very aware of the stages along the way to our position of backward-searching. So the historic is placed by what follows: austerity leading to consumerism etcetera. The mixed character of the decade comes through strongly in films. But I had gathered much from my family over the years, my mother having lived through the blitz and my father having fought in the Eighth Army and the D-Day Invasion. An uncle, my mother's brother, was a fighter pilot in the post-Battle of Britain phase and the battle for Malta. The line in *Roxy* 'not fighting to land' comes from him. It was a time of romanticism as well as hard turmoil. It's a curious paradox of writing from that war period. There was the assault from without and the sense of being besieged, civilisation disappearing and culture being eclipsed, and then on the other hand the celebration of that culture: core aspects of landscape and custom. It's a defensive reaction, involving recovery of potential, and this continues in altered form for a few years after the war. Of course the poetry dovetails with the art of the period, people like John Minton, Michael Ayrton. Keith Vaughan. Sutherland to a degree. There was that exhibition 'A Paradise Lost' at the Barbican Art Gallery [brings out a catalogue from the David Mellor exhibition, 1987]. There is a section on John Craxton and the pastoral, which includes 'Poet in a Landscape'. This drawing is Samuel Palmer-like but the spiky foliage and perspective are semi-modernist. My mother knew the Craxtons when they lived round here, so that encouraged my interest later on.

**AD:** There are astonishing Leslie Hurry things in there, the backdrop to the *Hamlet* ballet that Helpmann did.

**GS:** I have this Hurry self-portrait pinned up in the kitchen. It's Hamlet, disguised. His large hand gestures upwards, in alignment with the entwined couple in the background. Their limbs are like the fingers of a third hand. Are they Claudius and Gertrude, or himself and Gertrude? And there's that poster Hurry did for the film *Dead of Night*. Romantic macabre.

**AD:** He was mainly a stage designer.

**GS:** So many painters were involved in stage design. Last year I read Gilbert Cannan's *A Mummery* which is all about an artist seduced into theatre work. But it can offer marvelous possibilities. I was going to do a '49 text based on a ballet annual I picked up from that year. Maybe I felt I'd covered that issue of artifice and reality in *Roxy*. [Further examination of the catalogue.]

**AD:** [Filling a gap.] Inaudible cultural processes taking place.

**GS:** The portrait of his patron Grace Douglas is striking—for the surrounding elements as much as the main figure. Very Gothic.

**AD:** [Referring to Hurry's backdrop for *Hamlet*.] That's always impressed me most.

**GS:** Ah, there's that hand again, with a dagger. The arms emerge like columns. You have this sense of twining forms arising from roots, and there's a kind of energy current running across the picture, one thing turning into another. So typical of Forties imagery. The eye is led towards a fireplace, doorway or a proscenium stage on the right. It's actually a parallel form to the arm-columns on the left.

**AD:** It must be where the actors came on stage.

**GS:** So it is a proscenium stage. It has all those associations for me. I tend to see more than one thing in an image I'm presented with. Does that go back to my experience of acid?

**AD:** I was just thinking about that!

**GS:** How do you feel about the 1940s decade as a time of producing poetry?

**AD:** Giving it an acceptable cultural weight is very difficult because it produces so much arguing which I find very tiring. A lot of it's very important.

**GS:** Do you like Lynette Roberts' work?

**AD:** Yes.

**GS:** She seems to be coming into her own again. They even had a TV programme about her. Not that it was very good—I could hardly bear to watch it. But more of her work is out there and is able to come through with its quiet, energised procedures. The South American element, fused with the Celtic, gives her work a more exotic flavour. There is some strong Forties material in the proposed third volume, the one Eliot rejected.

**AD:** But it would be easy to say she had nothing to do with the New Romantics hanging round her. That's probably going too far but. . .

**GS:** She's so different from Kathleen Raine for instance from the same period, who has that, rather fatal in her case, Neoplatonic take on things. Actually I think Neo-Platonism is extraordinary and I've derived a great deal from it, but it can lead to empty generalisation, too abstract a feel for things.

**AD:** I think it led to her successes as well as her failures.

**GS:** Yes, there's clarity of observation within or beside the visionary. She probably did influence my early 70s work, when I was in a more Jungian mode. As I said, I had the Penguin Modern Poets selection and I heard her read from *The Lost Country* [1971] after that came out. It was interesting the way some 1940s work was recovered in a new context for Iain Sinclair's anthology *Conductors of Chaos*. The implication being that, whether conscious or incidental, contemporary poets have drawn on that earlier phase of activity.

**AD:** I don't really see it. It was crucial to that anthology but did one really go from David Jones to Andrew Crozier and think Aha, there's a continuation here. I don't think there was.

**GS:** Well, some poets must have been more conscious of this heritage than others. Crozier must have thought about it because it was one of his areas of interest. That looser flowing line fed through to the 1960s, or was reclaimed in the 1960s, although it may have come more from American models, Whitman and later writers. Still, some of that 1940s British poetry would have been read by Robert Duncan.

**AD:** Yes, he was involved with *Phoenix* in the late 1940s. He was certainly aware of British New Romantic poetry.

**GS:** Gael Turnbull was an important link man in the dialogue between British and American poetry, particularly that associated with Black Mountain. He was in touch with both Olson and Duncan by 1956. OK, this is later on but it shows that there was a two-way stream. And earlier there is Rexroth's 1949 anthology, which features Hendry, Roberts, Raine and others. I brought Rexroth's visit to England into *Days of '49*.

**AD:** It's difficult to relate your work to British poetry as it was in the 1950s and 1960s. Connection with poets of the 1970s and especially those working in long poems is easier. I wanted to talk about the discontinuity in British poetry. There are various versions of this—the "mid-century death", the unexpected and inspiring flourishing of American poetry in the 1950s, the unprecedented innovation of the decade after 1965, the return to experiment after an era which forbade it.

**GS:** I think all those theories are tenable in terms of explaining that. Certainly in British poetry publishing there was a failure of nerve, wasn't there, that forced people to work outside the mainstream. But you could say, twas ever thus. Perhaps the 1940s were unusual in that respect—the multiplicity and vitality of poetry publication may have been generated by the war as much as by anything else. With regard to how I fit into that, I would readily concede that for a long period, in the Seventies, I was working in a near-vacuum. Writing poems alongside writing a thesis was a bizarre thing. On the other hand, I had models on the page, so I wasn't entirely isolated. But I have remained my own man, or to put it a different way I've been reluctant to identify myself with any particular grouping within the British scene. I'm most obviously a London poet, but I spent five key years in Yorkshire in the 1970s, I spent a year in Sussex—which was deeply

influential as well. Geographically I am primarily a London poet and I got to know Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths and others who had been writing about this territory. Griffiths came from Kingsbury which is just north-west of here. I went with Alan Halsey to the family house in Valley Drive, where Bill was fiddling with a little water pump for the defunct garden pond. The interest in gadgets was parallel to, or part of, his experiment with verbal structure. I knew Gilbert Adair, Lawrence Upton and Robert Hampson. I was close to Robert Sheppard and Patricia Farrell. Bob Cobbing and Eric Mottram were parallel centres of activity, encouraging different strands of performance. Mottram offered support after I had fallen out with my supervisor at York over the nature and status of my research. Which was a major crisis in my life, I'd spent five years writing this thing. Eric understood where I was coming from in terms of trying to write an interdisciplinary thesis. He was a source of consolation but also an important link-man in terms of doing the Riverside interviews, enabling me to make contact with various poets, and just providing that forum at King's College. I heard so many wonderful people there. It seems that I heard just about everybody there. An event that stands out in my memory is Paul Buck and Glenda George's reading, performative in a subtle way. [See below for more extended comment on the KCL series.] I was even more involved with the Subvoicive scene and read there many times. This precipitated the writing of certain texts, because there was an expectation you would deliver something new. The milieu, with all kinds of exchange, was inspiring. But although I'm heavily immersed in London, its layers of history and its poetry scene or scenes, I've retained an independent take on writing. I haven't wanted to be restricted by dominant or fashionable practice. I'm not part of a card-carrying group.

**AD:** It does seem to me after being involved with all this for thirty years that there is a sort of gang culture in London. There is a line of division so that there is one group who really think they are the London School. The fact that you have been writing experimental poetry for several decades doesn't make you part of that group unless you write the same way that they do. This has caused quite a few problems of perception. So I think it's worth underlining that in London, apart from the sort of hardcore Cobbingites, you also have you and John Seed and me for example, and many other people. As you say, we're not card-carrying.

**GS:** I was always drawn to people who were considered part of other scenes. David Chaloner, who is associated with the Cambridge School but lived for much longer in London, in North London. John Welch, who is a good friend of mine and whose work I respect. My view of London poetry would be less exclusive than the normal definition and would embrace all kinds of other poeties. During my time in Ladbroke Grove I was close to Michael Horovitz, for example, who most people in the experimental sphere would write off.

**AD:** Good heavens, yes.

**GS:** They see him as a promoter who's willing to sacrifice integrity in order to gain popular acceptance. A mad kazoo player who drags poetry into the bustling arena. But the history of *New Departures* includes a good deal of worthwhile experiment, especially on the poetry and music front. Michael is good company and well informed on a range of issues. When you get him talking about Jeff Nuttall's work, for example. You shouldn't just write him off as some sort of Poetry Olympics, mad, pay a ticket and get in, person. I'm interested by his links with Stan Tracey, for example.

**AD:** There are these almost mnemonic rhymes—people find it easy to remember a classical Cambridge line or a classical London line, and several hundred other people who are slightly more differentiated or more compromised, whichever it is, just don't feature in the folklore.

**GS:** On the question of territory I'd like to show you this [unfolds a map of northwest London showing personal associations somewhat like Gloucester Mass. A kind of triangle stretching up to NW2].

**AD:** Cricklewood isn't actually at the centre.

**GS:** At the bottom right corner you have 184 Wardour Street where my grandfather's restaurant was—Seleri's [sic] Oriental Restaurant. But it was an Italian restaurant. Any kind of cuisine in those days, other than British, was called oriental. This was started by my great-grandfather, who arrived in London in 1882. . . [exposé of north west London history, including childhood experience of Abbey Road, omitted]. Those geographical aspects are germane to my work, including the matter of direction. I get teased about this. I hate main roads and always go to places by back routes. My father taught me the backstreets of London as a child, so I've got a very in-depth knowledge of back roads, and maybe this fits in with my love of marginalia, footnotes, glossaries, and accounts for some of the digressions in my work?

**AD:** Down those mean streets a poet must go!

**GS:** I went to so many interesting events there. And also used to go to the Film-makers' Co-Op next door. I met various people involved with the underground film movement through City Limits. It goes back way beyond that to the New Cinema Club and things. Jo Comino is a name that comes to mind. So as well as voyaging at sea I'm also a considerable voyager on foot and am very interested in maps and alignments, including mystical aspects, although I would now put more of a fence between myself and that whole mystical way of looking at things. There's a poem in *Music's Duel* that I left out of *Azimuth*, about Arthur Machen, who lived in Clarendon Road. It's called 'Dreads and Drolls' which is the title of one of Machen's lesser known books.

**AD:** [Reading.] 'A room at the top, a very small room,/not even a monastic cell.'

**GS:** I got some of that information from the second volume of his autobiography but I also used his introduction to *The Chronicle of Clemency*, which had its beginnings in the Notting Hill phase. These details supplemented what I saw as a local resident, in another era. Machen's work shows the potential—for literary use—of mystical thought. These days I'm probably more interested in the structure and tone of his language. But he did see the landscape in a highly mystical way. *Hill of Dreams* is Caerleon [Gwent], obviously, but is also Notting Hill.

**AD:** Notting Hill of Dreams? There's quite a lot of stuff related to ley lines, flying saucers and so on in *Azimuth*. It's embedded in the structure of the book. For me it evokes the time, it's part of the idealism of the time, and it evokes Ladbroke Grove as well, I guess. You seem to have moved a long way from that in the interim.

**GS:** It was still the Counter-Culture in those days. It was part of the Sixties. It's a truism, I think, that the 1960s lasted from 1964 to 1974, really. You know, when the miners' strike and the oil crisis caused a major shift. Although I don't think things really changed until 1979—it was Thatcher who changed things. I'm evoking that Counter-Culture in which the ideas of John Michell, for instance, were considered of major validity. Just now you mentioned Alfred Watkins and the Old Straight Track. During that period I was more committed to believing in it literally than I am now. Maybe this is the reason why I no longer write about stone rings and things. Although I could. We are creatures of our time and I think, even though I regard myself as independent to a degree, inevitably I'm influenced by the era and the larger culture we live in and that mystical take on things doesn't seem so possible now, not so urgently relevant. I suspect Iain Sinclair would agree with that.

**AD:** It's very big in Allen Fisher's poetry of the 1970s, too. It's quite an odd thing. I guess there is a rhyme between *Azimuth* and *Place* and *Lud Heat* and *Suicide Bridge*. It's a cluster. I'm interested in this partly because all that has disappeared so thoroughly and so the need for explanations, to get over to someone around today what it was all about.

**GS:** There are, I suspect, revisitings in my work but I would need to think about what those are. There is a section in *Roxy* where I am talking about the house as the head. The kind of emblem of the house as consciousness. I think that involves a degree of a more mystical approach to things. I

suspect that I can kind of latch back into that world a bit. It is a different poetic climate, a different cultural climate.

**AD:** That is part of what gives *Azimuth* its flavour. It was extremely open to currents in a wider specialised community.

**GS:** Even though at that time I subscribed more to a mystical mode of thought, the texts—as I think you say in your review of *Azimuth*—have their own space, their own validity within their local situation in the book. I think you say that things stand in opposition to each other or exist as separate units with a validity that it's up to the reader to determine. I would agree with you, and say again I hold Keats' idea of negative capability as very important. It's very relevant to a playwright because almost inevitably you have to write different points of view through different characters and letters and monologues. Even *Krapp's Last Tape* has a degree of negative capability I would think. Letting things stand with their own validity rather than imposing some unity from above. Tom McGrath kept on saying in that long interview-book, one of the Riverside interviews, that what he learnt from Olson was how to live in contradiction. Clearly this is equally relevant to poetry.

**AD:** If you have a poet who is hanging out with hippies and anarchists and so on, and that poet is reading *The Economist* every day and just not believing a word they say, that poet might well have few things where they're proven wrong, but they're not writing poetry. I think the political record of modern poets may not be very good, but it is poetic politics and not predicting the swing at the next election. You wanted to talk more about Alan Halsey?

**GS:** Yes, in relation to the poetry scene I've moved in, and in terms of the development of my craft if you like. It's been a two-way thing over the years but Alan is so well-informed about many aspects of literature and literally at the book face, dealing with literature. Reading things that came into the shop. And no doubt many of those were chance discoveries. We talked a lot about Pound from the beginning, discovering that we both had an enthusiasm for Pound, both the early lyric work but also particularly the Cantos. I feel that we both learnt a great deal about the fitting-together of words, things that work and don't work, from Pound. I think I learnt more about poetry from Pound's *Selected Letters* than from *ABC of Reading* or other more formal books that involved the craft of poetry. The inside back cover has a little index constituted by me in addition to the actual index. Here we have 'poetry, style etc.' Pages 48-50, letters to Harriet Monroe, 'Poetry must be as well written as prose.' 'No Tennysonianness of speech'. Although Pound was equivocal about that. He gave his treasured copy of Tennyson to one of his grandchildren. Pentameter: 'OK if it's interesting, but a lot of lines with no variety won't do', 'starting again', 'retouching'. And the rule-against-rules: 'Get loose as often as you can'. The fabric of poetic language, obviously I learnt from reading Pound and seeing what worked and what didn't work in his earlier poetry. Another writer that Alan and I talked about a great deal was Charles Doughty. There's a trunk at Gonville and Caius, isn't there, containing Doughty's notes on philology. They're a bit like the chits, the cards that were used initially for building the OED, kept in these huge wooden sheds behind the house in Banbury Road. Cards or scraps of paper with definitions of words and maybe selections of words, groupings. They're in this chest or large suitcase. Karen Mac Cormack and Steve McCaffery told me about this. Jeremy Prynne had shown them the material. Nobody can work out how to arrange it and nobody has tried to edit it, or else there were restrictions attached to the bequest. Possibly Prynne's a little reluctant to let anyone get going with it. It would need an expert to get his trust.

**AD:** Maybe all Prynne's poetry is really written from what's in the trunk.

**GS:** These word notes connect with Doughty's poetry, *A Dawn in Britain* and so on, and also *Arabia Deserta*. I think Alan and I learnt from Doughty the power of Anglo-Saxon, as against Romance, words. Like you, I studied Anglo-Saxon as an undergraduate and that's rubbed off on

me. Let's think of an example. Ring-road has such force as a noun. If you wanted to be adventurous, but probably mistakenly adventurous, you could use the noun circumferential. It is a noun as well. But it's an awkward word, it's long and abstract and it's hard to handle in a line and as a single word in a poem. There might be a place for it. I might go out on a limb now and say I don't see enough care for language in a lot of the work I hear these days, and that craft is important. Obviously it can become too stultifying. The use of the letter S, and I say this as someone whose surname begins with s, is the most tricky letter in the alphabet in terms of sound. I always try to avoid plurals in my work. Even though in the broader sense I encourage plurals, in terms of multi-layers, multiplicity of perspective. I hate it now when a radio announcer says "the Tubes" rather than "the Tube". It's quite a noticeable development, it's as if younger people don't understand that you can use the singular to be collective. I've always been very conscious of using S in a restrained way, and that's possibly something I learnt from either Pound or Doughty. I used to sit at the back of Alan Halsey's house with him after they closed the shop, or while Bridget or Rosy were running the bookshop, giving him a break. We would talk at length about the fabric of the language, being adventurous but not crazily awkward. Gothic words, strange words. I think Bunting tried to dissuade poets from using unusual words. But if you look at his poetry it's full of unusual words. This idea of sifting everything down to basics. I like using unusual words, I like recovering bizarre words. Another person I learnt a lot from is Geoffrey Grigson. I've long been an admirer of his poetry. I mainly like the poetry from the 1930s and the early 1940s. I think his poems and Bernard Spencer's are among the strongest in the Penguin 30s/40s anthologies. Beside the poetry there is *The Private Art: a Poetry Note-book*, which I believe Peter Riley also admires. On the one hand it's terribly conservative, and intolerant of, for instance, Charles Olson. He's always saying what you can do and what you can't do. I suspect he breaks those rules himself. But here's one reflection: 'Poems do depend on the unpoetic. The poetic, in the sense of the decayed popular matter of a previous mode, gets in the way, though there are cunning poets who use it in a slightly disguised form.' Actually that's quite relevant to what I was saying about unusual words. It's a perceptive comment. I like dipping into the book, which has a great picture of Grigson on the front.

**AD:** The bleaching or overexposure works very well. He was very good at writing about poetry but he didn't really like anything that came along after 1938.

**GS:** This is the paradox. I say I like reading him and have learnt a lot from him but I have to take it all with a grain of salt because he's so intolerant of much of the stuff that I find fascinating. He writes off Blake's prophetic poems, for instance, which have been hugely influential on my writing.

**AD:** If we're talking about the mid-century death, and how the people who ran poetry publishing and reviewing, at least up until 1980, prolonged it, Grigson had a lot to do with that. He embodied it. It's like, every time something brilliant came along, he said "No, no, no. Five years in jail for that". He was just so intolerant and brutal. Actually he was a gifted guy. I'm saying this in the cause of reconciliation. In the Counter-Culture you have people who have terrific gifts and also glaring faults, who treat other people badly and so forth. If you read someone like Grigson, if you look at what he liked as opposed to what he failed to like, it's very interesting. He loved poetry.

**GS:** Grigson championed Landor's verse and did the Centaur Press edition. It shows a much more open side to Grigson. [Digression on *Imaginary Conversations*.] Landor had an influence on Pound, they were both backward-looking historians who wanted to be new. [Digression on collecting Landor's Works.] Sorry, I've taken another detour. One thing loops into another. I love miscellanies, with their almost random patterns [pulls one volume of Arber's *An English Garner* off the shelves]. There are historical tracts, a biographical memoir, essays, poems here. This is all fugitive material—grist to my mill in terms of going down backstreets, and side-avenues. You

know Pope, Gay and Swift did *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*, which was published without attribution initially. It's a collection of slightly disparate materials but they rub up against each other and generate a creative tension. That's probably relevant to what Alan and I were doing in *Days of 49*. When I was studying for my thesis I read a mass of lesser known material and I think that scatter, with tightly concentrated moments, still defines my approach to writing. My 1970s reading included Du Bartas' *Divine Weeks*, translated by Sylvester and Palingenius' *Zodiac of Life*, translated by Googe—both long works with a seemingly systematic but actually quite circuitous course. [Further remarks on Renaissance compendia and epic, including Sandys' Ovid.] I would want to resist any kind of commentary which put an impediment in the way of someone's interpreting something, but I love having supplementary or parallel texts. The juxtaposition, the interplay, as in Chris Marker's *Silent Movie*, which I saw in Toronto in 1997.

**AD:** This does relate to memorising all the backstreets.

**GS:** The danger of writing in that way is you get quite scattered. Maybe I was getting quite close to the edge with *Le Fanu's Ghost*. I decided I wanted to write each text in a different way. There is no repetition in terms of form. Each text is different. Also I had this huge area to deal with. But I find that a lot of those texts lend themselves to performance, so they're not just bookish cupboard texts. I've been talking a great deal about poetry from past eras but, for me, it's all potentially in the present. Even where I'm using texts with old spelling, as in parts of *Harlot Double*, the distance is part of an immediate effect—or at least intended to be so. But the current work is less exhaustive, perhaps in reaction to what I did before. What my books have in common is the habit of working simultaneously across a span: I mean a text that appears early or in the middle may have been produced alongside something that appears much later on. You could see this as part of an Azimuth co-ordinator effect. The connections are as much random as planned. I feel I could comment more on your main line of inquiry. I can see that it hasn't been satisfactorily explained or described. It's something that by implication comes into Peter Barry's *Poetry Wars*. By implication for what happened later on, and why the shutdown of the more experimental poetry stuff happened. It must be part of residual conservatism that existed from a previous phase.

**AD:** The poetry Eric was promoting really pissed a lot of people off. I think it's very difficult going deeper. Like saying why English poetry went into such a flat and uncreative condition in mid-century. I'm not sure an explanation is available.

**GS:** That's what I meant by your main level of inquiry.

**AD:** I'm looking for a witness who would say, No, it didn't die off in that way, there was no breach of continuity. But everyone I speak to says the same thing.

**GS:** You did a very interesting interview with Seymour-Smith but I can't remember if you got him commenting on that phenomenon.

**AD:** No, because he was on the wrong side really. He really didn't like the literary establishment very much but he never read what we think of as modern poetry. When he saw *Angel Exhaust* and began to read some of it he really liked it, it was exciting. It was even more striking that he could be a professional critic from sometime in the 1950s to 1995, when he died, and never have encountered what we think of as modern poetry. It wasn't Trade. He was never going to be asked to review it because it wasn't seen as commercial. It wasn't in the High Street shops. He reviewed probably thousands of books, that's not an exaggeration, but he was never asked to review Prynne or Allen Fisher or anybody.

**GS:** In conversations with Nathaniel Tarn years ago I would complain about this situation. This was when he used to come back to London from Princeton, and I would complain about the block to the dissemination of experimental poetry, whatever you call it, the Faber and Faber wall and other barriers, particularly with the reviewing system, the *TLS* post-1970s. Nathaniel would say, twas ever thus, even in the heady days. First of all he would talk about publishing at Cape Goliard

and say that was never accepted as much as one might assume. But also he would refer back to his youth, and he would argue that it was just a continual series of blocks. Something leaks out which is interesting and then gets clamped down again. Is it true that Pete Townshend saved Faber from folding? I think he injected a lot of money into the firm. That was around the time when an even more conservative editorial policy of poetry emerged. They were becoming more relentlessly commercial. You are determining the reception of things by publishing certain things. You are partly determining what is going to be considered useful and valuable.

**AD:** The problem with Tarn saying that is that it removes the possibility of choice by editors inside the machine, so that they are absolved from guilt but also they don't achieve anything. So it's simply an inevitable process, like a huge building with no windows that just looks at you. I don't really buy that. For me some editors have achieved great things. I'm thinking of Lucie-Smith's anthology here, and Penguin Modern Poets, and Eric at *Poetry Review*, and Potts and Herd at *Poetry Review*. Then again there are the actions of someone like Grigson as a reviewer from about 1938 on, which I think were unacceptable and in fact criminal. I see this huge difference between different editors. So I don't really believe it's all one homogeneous thing.

**GS:** It does perhaps come back to a contradiction at the heart of English culture, in the sense that England is a nation of shopkeepers and has that very material engine which—by reaction—spawns non-utility things. A kind of quirky individualism produces experiment but this remains on the fringe, Parts of *Roxy*, for instance section 33, are concerned with this. It's different in America, where the outside seems more able to penetrate the mainstream. Is our exclusion—and the privileging of a kind of residual conservatism in writing—to do with an anti-intellectual and materialist streak in British culture?

**AD:** People involved in culture in Britain have an antibody to that. So many people in Britain have written terrific poetry although surrounded by people who were very suspicious of that.

**GS:** It is interesting just how many poets have had to publish their own first books. Byron did for instance, and Pound. Part of the appeal of that activity from the 1960s through to the early 80s was the way in which the productions reflected so well the content, often a result of the writer's direct involvement. Examples would include Allen Fisher's early works, up to *Unpolished Mirrors* [the A4 serials], and Bill Griffiths' varied output. There was a sense of getting it on the hoof, at times primitive but there was an integrity to it. Even in the much smarter and distinctive Trigram editions. Asa Benveniste was an expert typesetter, better than those—such as John Sankey—who set the Fulcrum books. But even with Fulcrum there is care and attention in the laying out of text.

**AD:** Quite a lot of the aura of Allen's books has to do with their physical shape.

**GS:** This projection of the poetry in print, preserving page size as written and run off on a Gestetner, was part of the adventurousness of the period.

**AD:** Something did come to an end in round about 1980. People living through that divide led their lives in a continuous way, so they weren't aware of it as a divide. Which brings us to what the nature of the era is.

**GS:** Some London poets tried to maintain artistic freedom by moving out of the capital. I don't wish to ignore the activity going on outside London before that, I'm just concentrating on the scene I was most involved with. A core of counter-culture poets living in the capital did disperse. Whatever advantages they gained, there was a national malaise and a shift of priorities, so you couldn't escape. But, as Robert Sheppard has argued, those bad times provoked some powerful writing. In establishing what changed, you would have to factor in the influence of LANGUAGE poetry, as well as the different social and political climate. As far as London is concerned, there has been continuity through the SubVoicive reading series, which in a sense morphed into *Crossing the Line* and *Blue Bus*. I had a bit of a disagreement with Michael Haslam at the Grace Lake memorial reading. As we left he was dismissing London as tinsel. I said, You have to

remember there are other things beside Oxford Street. There are pockets of vital activity. What about Veer Books? and indeed the memorial was a Birkbeck event. I went to a lovely private view of an art exhibition off Brick Lane the other day. A painter called Irma Irsara, whom Frances [Presley] has worked with. There was a real feeling that this was a pocket of other endeavour. There are still lots of those around London. It would be wrong to write off London as totally destroyed by consumerism and Thatcherist values.

**AD:** I just can't agree with Michael for ten seconds there.

**GS:** He probably felt overwhelmed and weighed down. The Anna Mendelsson event was an emotional occasion. Or perhaps it was to do with what had gone on earlier in the day with him. I think he was just happy to get back to Hebden Bridge and some residual core of creativity going on there.

**AD:** I think the London alternative scene has had some dips but right now it's flowing at a million gallons a minute. There has been a kind of fever chart that has gone up and down in a dramatic way. I guess London is a boom and bust economy and that might apply to culture as well. I don't have a view on the dates within that chart.

**GS:** It would need to be plotted carefully.

**AD:** Can you say more about Du Bartas?

**GS:** He was a Calvinist who tried to base religious conviction on science or what was taken as such. He's mainly memorable for *The Divine Weeks*, an encyclopedic history of the world, unfinished. What exists is more of a scriptural epic, which had some influence upon *Paradise Lost*, although that poem is more dramatic in the stage sense. Du Bartas balances the imaginative and the factual. You can ignore the didactic and still appreciate his exuberant use of language and scope of inquiry. I know the work from Joshua Sylvester's translation [1592-1605], which was issued in "parcel" and then collected form. It has considerable descriptive colour. I was intrigued by the structure of weeks, with its condensing of history into segments, and used this as an inspiration for *Roxy* which has 52 sections of, as it were, current history and aesthetic debate from classical times to the present. I should stress that in my own projects I'm trying to do something completely different from these Renaissance long poems. Something more open and fragmentary within that span.

## Session Two: 28 January 2012

**AD:** Tell us about the Riverside Interviews.

**GS:** As I recall this came out of going to poetry events at the Riverside Studios. There was a woman there called Erica Bolton, who dealt with publicity for plays and poetry readings. She was extremely helpful not only in terms of my getting access but also, after I'd published the books, ensuring their availability at the Riverside bookshop. Initially it was just hearing the poets but then I would follow that up and it became a rolling program. The title of the series wasn't just a reference to the Studios, which incidentally I also valued for their role in film production from the 1930s on. Additionally, Riverside had a jazz/blues connotation. There was a record label that reissued a lot of early Paramount recordings and then did their own, featuring people such as Thelonious Monk. Then there was also Robert Johnson's 'Travelling Riverside Blues' which I always found so evocative. Initially I interviewed the Beat poets. I did Lawrence Ferlinghetti who complimented me by saying it was the best interview with him that had ever been done. A slight exaggeration I think. I did a much more extended interview with Ginsberg. Quite a bit of that was recorded in [Barry] Miles' flat near the Post Office Tower. We did various follow-up sessions. Next I did Gregory Corso. That was done at Jay Landesman's house in Islington, lovely terrace near the canal. I went across one evening and Corso was there listening to Lully, some piece of wonderful baroque, on a ghetto blaster at full blast and then we got on to doing the interview. Then either he or I suggested going to the pub called The Bluecoat Boy. After a few drinks he got increasingly aggressive and quarrelsome and pulled the tape recorder from my bag, trying to confiscate it. We came to blows and I let him have the cassette, which he returned once we were back at the house. Afterwards I sent the text twice to his address in New York, for checking, but it was returned unopened. I was already in touch with New Directions, his publisher, and I dealt with a lovely woman called Griselda Ohannessian, who acted as an intermediary in getting the text sorted out further. When he finally received the book he claimed not to have had final say over the contents. But it was well received. I also interviewed Ed Dorn. This was potentially the most successful one but it never came out. He wanted to revise it and continue it by post. I don't know. There were various delays. I got very busy and after another couple of Riverside volumes I ran out of money and space and the series collapsed. But it finally is going to come out in a book I've edited with Justin Katko, from Shearsman. I did a lengthy introduction explaining where I think the interview would have gone, basing that not just on my memories but what Dorn said to me. And checking various things with Jenny Dunbar Dorn, his widow. Of all the people I interviewed the person I had most kinship with was Dorn. One of my biggest regrets is that this never turned into a book of the length of the Ginsberg or Tom McGrath volumes. The Dorn interview and my introduction to it are germane to what we were talking about, the Cambridge empathy with that American poetry and development of those procedures. There is quite a bit of comment about Donald Davie, and Dorn's relationship with England. With luck that will come out around the same time as the [Dorn] Collected Poems. Did you see I gave you a copy of my Olson paper ['From Weymouth Back']? I became friendly with George Butterick in I suppose 1980 and he was very supportive of my project. He helped me gain access to the archive at University of Connecticut, Storrs, where he was curator of Literary Manuscripts. This includes a mass of material on writers associated with Black Mountain: Olson, Creeley, Dorn, Dawson. Also Tom Raworth papers from the 1970s, Tom Clark stuff etcetera. They've got all Prynne's letters to Olson. Butterick lived in Willimantic. He and his wife Colette were very supportive of what I was doing. The bookshop in Willimantic, Ziesing Brothers, was another link. The Ziesing brothers actually published my first book, *Playground for the Working Line*, which contains some of the poems from *Azimuth*. I did a very long interview with Ted Enslin whose work interested me then,

although I confess I can only appreciate the shorter lyrics these days. I still admire the ambition of *Ranger* and *Synthesis* and so on but textually they seem rather inert. I went up to where he was living, in Maine nearly on the Canadian border. We did the interview in bizarre circumstances because there was a power cut and we had to use oil lamps. He was very much a back to the land person. The battery on my tape recorder was getting slower and slower. I did capture a huge amount though. That has never come out and I don't have the time to deal with such projects now. A part of the tapes has been transcribed. Likewise I did a fairly long interview with Cid Corman [1981] and I think that is quite important as a record of what went down, particularly in terms of his relationship with Olson. I found Corman arrogant and conceited. Despite his significance as an editor and poet, he was an unpleasant person to deal with.

**AD:** I've got mixed feelings about delving into that.

**GS:** Sure. He did come up with the goods in term of discussing his work. He was very self-centred in his perspective but nevertheless was willing to talk at length about his literary contacts. Obviously I was very interested in the magazine *Origin* and he talked at some length about editing it. He also talked about his own poetry and living in Japan and so on. His wife, who seemed subservient, was running their Japanese restaurant in Boston. It's like those stories about Wyndham Lewis where Froanna only appears at the hatch to serve meals. Mind you, I don't think Froanna was as downtrodden as those apocryphal stories suggest. The last Riverside book published, which broke my project, was the Tom McGrath volume: 300 pages plus. Tom I had known for quite a while through Michael Horovitz's circle and through Barry Miles, Tom having been editor of *IT* and at the centre of so much that was going on in London even though he was a Glaswegian. In the mid-sixties he was a friend of Trocchi and met all the big American poets as they came to London and intersected with them. He was an interesting poet himself as well as a playwright. His play *The Hard Man* had been a big success. I interviewed him over a two-year period, first in London at the ICA and elsewhere, then in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Some phone conversations also fed into the final text. This became a book of 300 pages, including a critical introduction and illustrations. There are performance photos featuring such actors as Patrick Malahide, Deborah Findlay, Ian Charleson—striking stuff locating moments of inventive theatre. There is also a photo of Olson that has never appeared elsewhere. It was quite a balancing act to get all this into a shaped format and to get the book printed. I'd consulted Tom about many points of detail, trying to get everything right. We were committed to a "deep soak" approach. Then he freaked out when he saw the book, which seemed to him too revealing. He had a kind of breakdown at the time. I don't know how much it had to do with my book. It probably wasn't primarily to do with this, but he pulled out of a launch in Edinburgh. I'd printed a thousand copies or something partly because of an imminent restaging of *Animal* at the National Theatre and of course it was quite hard to sell and store the book. I had a grant from the Arts Council that was meant to cover the printing costs, but the book came out bigger than envisaged so it didn't even cover the printing costs. I was pleased with the book because of its circuitous progress through various aspects of the arts: theatre, film, dance, poetry. Tom talked quite a bit about Scottish poetry. And Scottish literature in general. Including Neil M. Gunn whose Zen perspective interested him. McGrath had done a radio adaptation of Gunn's novel *The Silver Darlings* which was brilliantly atmospheric, using binaural sound effects. Beyond the specific Scottish context there is much about creativity and imagination. Irving Wardle gave the book a glowing review in *The Times*. However, it ended up as a nightmare. I overreached myself completely. I was also trying to finish *Azimuth* which came out the year after that. You could say they are similarly ambitious in scope. Jerome Rothenberg was the subject of another volume in the series. I intersected with him in various contexts. Through Eric Mottram, who was enthusiastic about ethnopoetics and that whole project that Rothenberg had, but also through various performances

that Rothenberg did, probably at the instigation of Bob Cobbing, at places like the London Musicians Collective. The Rothenberg book was, initially, another case of misfortune. I turned up at King's College for the interview and I'd been teaching through the day and had the most terrible migraine so I didn't feel able to contribute much while Eric and Jerry were talking. But everything worked out because Jerry and I agreed to do a further separate interview, conducted partly by post, I think. So there are two parts to the book. Jerry was helpful and cooperative, the complete reverse of some of the others I've mentioned. He was a consummate professional in editing and revising and insisting that certain things be done. I should acknowledge that Ginsberg was as well. Somewhat like Michael Horovitz in terms of the reality behind the public persona, Ginsberg was extremely precise in his editorial methods, and indeed eloquent about poetry, going way back. Both Ginsberg and Rothenberg were supportive to the nth degree. Some years later I interviewed Ginsberg again, for *City Limits*, a shorter discussion. Another projected subject was Amiri Baraka, whom I interviewed in Hartford, Connecticut in 1981. This was after a performance he did with jazz musicians but I had pre-arranged the interview. Later I asked if he would continue the discussion by letter but he said he would prefer it if I merely re-printed a talk that he had given at the American Writer Congress [October 1981], that is alongside our interview. I remember that when we exchanged letters in 1982 he had been sentenced to 46 weekends in jail [instead of 90 days 'straight time']. Hanne Bramness supplied me with the text of the talk, but alas I never got this volume published. I also interviewed Joseph Chaikin, who was fascinating, at Riverside Studios. There was a technical hitch with the first tape we recorded and he very generously agreed to do that part again. It may not have been as detailed but we went on to cover other areas. For me these encounters were an education as well as a matter of record and, as I've indicated, the experience of alternative theatre feeds into my poetry. But again I never got the Chaikin volume out. I must get this stuff transferred digitally. I don't have the resources to publish that kind of thing now. Co-editing the Dorn interview book reminded me how such work can sap your creative energy.

**AD:** It strikes me that you were chronicling American poets of the 1950s. When I first heard about the series I thought it would be English poets of the 1970s because that was what I most wanted. There is a great lack of source interviews for those people. I think it's right to get people a certain way into their career, you capture much more that way.

**GS:** You've put your finger on another major regret, that I didn't do an equivalent number of interviews with British poets in whom I was at least equally interested. I did ask Tom Raworth whether he would do a book-length interview but he declined, saying that he'd said everything necessary in the interview with Barry Alpert in *Vort*. I'm sure he would have had other things to say. I can remember him doing things at SubVoicive which enthused me. This was a long way after the *Vort* interview which admittedly does cover the Olson and Dorn connection quite well. I found in talking to Dorn that things would come out that weren't in equivalent interviews. Justin Katko believes there is stuff in there not covered anywhere else.

**AD:** Pretty irritating to do someone densely interviewed—they've already done it for someone else.

**GS:** I tried to persuade Basil Bunting to do a book-length interview, and Tom Pickard was a helpful link person there. But that never happened. Tom Pickard himself I wanted to do. Lee Harwood I wanted to do, although I was only in regular contact with him from around 1983 when I was putting together the selection of contemporary British poetry for *North Dakota Quarterly*. Who else. . . of course I would have loved to include Barry MacSweeney.

**AD:** My bet is that it would never have seen the light of day, whatever you did. Barry wanted to control how he seemed to the outside world, but every time he spoke at length he said things he couldn't control.

**GS:** Have you ever heard the recording of Barry reading at Goldsmith's College in the early 1980s? It is followed by a discussion in which Barry speaks with some precision about the poetic art.

**AD:** He must have been sober. It had to be the right time of day. I spent three days interviewing Barry once and he nixed the whole thing.

**GS:** It is a risky business doing interviews. It's regrettable for instance that Sidney Graham wasn't interviewed at length. But you can imagine what might have happened.

**AD:** If you have someone so finicky about words then the need for control isn't going to just switch off when they turn to prose. The likelihood is that they either want to rewrite it and that gets very complex, it turns into poems and you never get it back, effectively. Or they realise that they really want to write poetry and talking prose is just not how they want to be seen and listened to.

**GS:** I did one with Robert Creeley in the company of Peter Middleton and Tom Pickard.

**AD:** You had a mike that would pick up four voices?

**GS:** We were sitting on a rug in a garden somewhere in north-east London, probably Dalston. I think it came out perfectly clearly. Most of the interviewing was done by me or Peter, who was still living in London at that point.

**AD:** I just get more excited about the English end.

**GS:** Roy Fisher is someone else I would have loved to have done. There are some very useful interviews with Roy. So I don't think that was quite as crucial as Barry or Tom Raworth. Incidentally, I love Fisher's poem 'Paraphrases', which sends up the whole business of critical inquiry, particularly with regard to biographical information. I have a hilarious recording of this from a performance at Pentameters in Hampstead. But yes I agree with you that it would have been fruitful to investigate British poets who hadn't received much or any coverage.

**AD:** I think we're going to talk quite a lot about the London School.

**GS:** Before we get to that, could I just add a PS on the Riverside interviews? I wouldn't want the reader to think that there isn't quite extensive coverage of the English scene at certain moments in the series, where it dovetails with the American scene, and the Tom McGrath interview definitely has quite a lot within the sphere of what you were defining just now.

I was quite keen on combining live interview with written revision/addition. Which could well have parallels with my method of composition in *Azimuth*. I was quite keen on a composite method that had the spark of live conversation but also had deeper quiet rumination, so that you had a balance between spontaneity of expression and precision of thought. I was keen on doing that with Ed Dorn but through the vagaries of communication and so on it never came about.

**AD:** There is quite a casualty rate, isn't there? It's quite ambitious. OK. Die Londoner Schule. [Reads from a paper.]

I wanted to acquire more info on the London School. I am sure that if we look at the scene in 1968 1978 1988 1998 and 2008 we see totally different cultural objects, but the lack of documentation makes this very difficult. Writers Forum supposedly began in 1963, and is still going, but most of that history is very hard to recover. The London scene is like a bus station, open on all sides. People blow in and out the whole time. So several hundred people could claim to be members of it. I found that most people offering wares there pretty much had a cardboard sign round their necks saying SCHMUCK. So identifying with all of them was unthinkable. Being there is quite different from identifying. I realised recently that whenever I was taking part in events there, there was at least one person who invisibly had decided that four or five people were The London School and everyone else, notably me, wasn't registering and, in their memories, wouldn't appear. It was hard to avoid concluding that really the whole scene did not belong to them, and to plan memories in which they didn't appear except disguised as waste paper baskets

or pillars. So, even if you define the London School as a tacitly shared sensibility, it seems more like a set of four or five sensibilities which linked different knots of people and excluded others. So I wondered what you felt about the silently shared ideals. To get concrete, I wondered if we could locate followers of Olson, mainly via Mottram, and followers of Cobbing, and find that they have nothing in common. Perhaps the tensions in the public moments were due to a kind of gang warfare.

**GS:** I think gang warfare is putting it too strongly unless you want to go back to the Poetry Society wars. Certainly there were different coteries. But my abiding memory is of the intersection of scenes rather than of demarcation in the hostile sense. There were different groupings, and veiled and open tension or hostilities, but I really found that it was like a continual series of doors that opened, a bit like that cardboard thing where. . .

**AD:** Advent calendars?

**GS:** No. . . no. I don't know what I'm thinking of.

**AD:** I think you've just invented something!

**GS:** It was like a series of windows or doors. The way in which one meeting would lead on to another. I think you're right that there were a group of people who were predominantly into Olson rather than into Continental European sound poetry at the other end. Those were two poles. On the one hand, Eric Mottram, who I suppose for most people would typify a consciousness that displays the influence of Pound and Olson but is remoulding that in a British context. He represents that and Cobbing represents the other impulse. Yet Cobbing equally drew on American models. Allen [Fisher] was saying to me after the paper I gave at that conference in the University of Kent. . .

**AD:** The Olson conference?

**GS:** Yes in November 2010. Allen was encouraging me to include Cobbing within that. I don't remember Cobbing talking to me at all about Olson but undoubtedly he would have known about that. Allen's point was that Cobbing would have encouraged, if not initiated, attention to Olson's work through Better Books. So I think there must have been some carry-over there. Although he had this image of the sound poet and the Xerox publishing wizard, Cobbing had a solid awareness of what you might call more traditional poetry. I can remember once when I went over to his house, we spent a whole morning chatting about poetry. Inter alia we discussed in some detail the poetry of DH Lawrence, which Cobbing was very keen on. There was a meshing of contexts. I think the fact of being in London and a continuous exposure to readings encouraged what you might call the long take. This would reflect Olson's influence but Pound also, obviously. There was a climate in which sustained projects, with varied textures, were appreciated. Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat* or *Suicide Bridge*, Allen Fisher's *Place*, and Bill Griffiths' *Cycles* have both an urgency of the moment and a historical sweep. Eric Mottram's longer works such as *A Book of Herne*, Robert Hampson's *Seaport* and my own projects were also part of that climate. We had different approaches but there are common features. At the other end there were poets with more of a playful sound programme and their texts tended to function as smaller units. But linguistic invention was prominent in both areas. If you look at the layout of texts you can see how print conditions helped to generate this. Cobbing, Griffiths and Fisher developed new page and book forms by experimenting with Gestetner machines and photocopiers. There may be a relationship between this situation and the production of variant texts. Griffiths would assemble books with slightly different combinations of material and Fisher's books engage with other work that leads in or out of a given project. It's a sliding, fluid notion of text. This process wasn't entirely separate from more traditional technology. Someone who spanned different areas is John Sankey, whose print works were in Ingestre Road, close to Tufnell Park. I used to go over and chat to him about his various contacts, and methods of typesetting and printing. He'd printed many of the City

Lights books, magazines such as *Approach* and *Origin*, plus various Fulcrum and Trigram publications. He had edited the magazine *The Window*, so he had an inside feel for poetry as well as the physical expertise. He printed Migrant Press books and many of the Elizabeth Press books, including work by Enslin. I got some of the books I didn't have from him, from the horse's mouth as it were. This is one: the copy of Ed Dorn's *Geography* from which the second edition was set. [Discussion of misalignment and uneven inking in a book GS pulls out.] Sankey had contacts all over the world. I was interested in how the writers and editors intersected, and in the mechanics of production. So he was very useful. A very likeable man. Around this time or shortly before, I met Eric Mottram. I told you how he had been supportive of me in terms of my academic career, but obviously through him I began going to the King's College readings. They had a different ambience from the SubVoicive readings or the writers' workshop. As one might expect they were a little bit more formal, being in a seminar room, which if memory serves was a rectangular space. Eric's introductions were informative. I saw a whole mass of people there between 1978 and 1984: poets familiar from the London scene but also people I'd never read or met such as Ralph Hawkins. The pairings were adventurous: Allen Fisher with Geoff Ward, Tom Clark and John Welch, Dom Sylvester Houedard and Peter Middleton. Barry MacSweeney and John Wilkinson on the same evening.

**AD:** I think I was there.

**GS:** Bob Cobbing, Iain Sinclair, Alan Halsey, Lee Harwood, Ken Edwards. Robert Sheppard, one of the younger people involved. Paul Buck and Glenda George did an extraordinary reading. I think this was a kind of play that involved a mat or rug on the floor. And that appealed to my sense of theatre. It was a performance in the true sense of a reading that involved movement and certain timbre of voice. She I think was doing some kind of dance thing or gesture. Another memorable event was John Porter's voicing of the dual text edition of *Beowulf* that Bill Griffiths had published. I still think this is the finest modern English version. Porter is faithful to the syntax and diction of the original, without ponderous sound rattling. Bill also read that evening. One performance I preserved on tape was Iain Sinclair's reading from *Suicide Bridge*. He spoke about the energies connected with certain areas, parts of London obviously but also Cambridge. This was just after the Blunt affair had become public and he wittily traced a Cambridge consciousness back to the Templars. It was a strong reading that picked up certain threads. The 'ACE' section from 'Hand & Hyle, Ascending' was particularly dynamic. I can give you a specific date for that event: 27th November 1979. After those readings people would go and drink at the Wellington, the pub adjacent to the Lyceum. So that was one important scene that I meshed with. One meeting would lead to another and a page voice would gain definition. In the next room I've got all the books that I bought at these readings, mostly A4. Here's an example in smaller format: Geoff Ward's *Comeuppance*, bought the evening when I heard him read [January, 1982].

**AD:** There was stuff you could only buy at readings. There were no shops.

**GS:** There were. There was Compendium, with Paige Mitchell's input and then Mike Hart's. Nick Kimberley had moved on to Duck Soup. There was also Bernard Stone's shop in Floral Street.

**AD:** He wasn't keen on the modern stuff.

**GS:** Well he certainly had a lot and would reminisce. I should include Bernard as a significant contact. My contact with Compendium goes back to the late sixties or maybe seventies, when I got to know Nick Kimberley and Paul Hammond, but Bernard Stone I didn't link up with till 1978. I bought a lot of stuff from him. I hope when we go back to the Forties we can talk about these layered scenes. When Eric Mottram came back to England from America he lived in Vicarage Gate which is just across the road from Kensington Church Walk and he would have known Bernard then. He and Bernard went back a long way. You had a situation where the academic scene—or one part at least—and the performance scene were still linked with bookshops. There were easy

lines of access to challenging and difficult material. So there were the King's readings. Then there was SubVoicive which I think was the most fruitful of these long-lasting reading series. A long time ago I tried to sort out relevant material but didn't get that far in documenting things. [GS pulls some sheets from a folder to prompt reminiscence.]

**GS:** I need to talk properly about what went on at these places. The atmosphere of each venue was important and did have an effect on the readings, obviously. For instance, Jackson's Lane Community Centre was echoey, draughty and dark. Gothic, really. The White Swan, the venue from about 1983 to 1989, was more grand, with mirrors and oak. Sometimes we used to have to wait for a group of Freemasons to clear the room, where they also met. You could see the box like a croquet box where they kept their aprons and so on. This bizarre effect was accentuated by a poor copy of a portrait of Elizabeth I that hung on the wall adjacent to the area where most of the poets performed. Initially the place seemed relatively uncrowded but the bar and doorway became increasingly yuppified and we had to close the windows. The White Swan seemed to be a space where anything could happen but not in as extreme a way as at the London Musicians Collective, which I'll come on to. It definitely invited new work. There was a measure of trust between people who on the whole were like-minded although obviously each had their own modes of operation. You could feel you could try work-in-progress there and it would be measured with a degree of tolerance but also there was a willingness to critique things afterwards. It wasn't a workshop but there was some feedback in conversation afterwards. The time allotted to performers was generous. When I launched *Azimuth* in June 1984 I did two 40 minute segments. You might on other occasions have two poets on the bill but never three, as so often nowadays. Presumably I was the only performer that night. A lot of important stuff was, if not formally launched, revealed there—came out in layers. I heard Allen Fisher's *Unpolished Mirrors*, probably in a number of readings as he was working through that. I remember Ulli Freer doing stuff that involved movement and weirdly creative gestures. Cris Cheek was a strong presence on the London scene then. I remember his book *A Present* coming out and him just handing it to members of the audience, a lovely gesture. Reading from it but also just giving people copies. Tom Raworth gave an extraordinarily powerful reading of *Catacoustics*, long before it was published [probably October 1985]. I have tried to fill gaps in Lawrence Upton's records [of SubVoicive readings]. Although I wasn't keeping a journal I do have appointment diaries from the period. Carlyle Reedy, Alan Halsey, Bill Griffiths in 1983. Geraldine Monk, Gilbert Adair in 1984. Barry MacSweeney, Clive Bush, Hanne Bramness, Maggie O'Sullivan in 1985. Ken Edwards, Nathaniel Tarn in 1986. Mainly British but there were quite a few Americans too: Dennis Barone, Lyn Hejinian, Ellen Zweig, Bill Sherman, Bobbie Louise Hawkins. It's worth noting the presence of female poets. Some people have remembered it as an exclusively male environment but that's not true, although it was predominantly male. Elaine Randell and Frances Presley read there in 1988. Also Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley [possibly later]. Anyway, that gives you a smattering of names from the 1980s. The next venue was The Moon, just behind Queen Square. This had a tiny room upstairs which was intimate but rather cramped. I heard David Miller, Billy Mills, Robert Hampson and Virginia Firnberg there. Allen Fisher did a 'farewell to London' reading in January 1989. This was a retrospective, going right back to *long shout to Kernewek*, and is the best performance I've heard Allen give. There was a marvellous moment during *Paxton's Beacon* or *Becoming* when music erupted from below to match the rhythm of the poem. Subsequent venues from 1990 included The Prince George of Cumberland, which was near the Diorama. This had a huge reading space and a large pool table for laying out books. Alan Halsey did a rendition of 'Companion Studies' and 'Eleatic Electric', with the texts memorised, so he did not need to look down at the page [October 1990]. It's something I've seen him do since but in this space it was particularly effective, reclaiming the oral tradition. A few events took

place at The Two Brewers, Monmouth Street, where Maggie O'Sullivan read from *In the House of the Shaman* to a packed audience [March 1990]. She'd been up in the north for a couple of years and spoke about the line of the horizon affecting the layout of her writing, with more pages in A4 landscape/horizontal format. Next was The Archers, off Brick Lane, a smallish pub in very different territory. An aroma of Indian restaurants and a long ride home for many of us. I remember hearing Eric Mottram read there. This was the launch of *Resistances*, his homage to René Char, and he also read an unpublished work 'Friends of the Long Trail'. Another example of a whole evening devoted to one poet. After that [1992] the series moved to The Three Cups, near Red Lion Square, which was a good central location. There was plenty of space to gather in the bar, good for extended conversation. That lasted for quite a while before the shift to The Churchill in Mount Pleasant [1999]. This had a massive reading area upstairs and events were periodically interrupted by bar staff coming up to get food from the adjacent kitchen. The next venue was The Betsey Trotwood in Farringdon, opposite *The Guardian* building. A memorable occasion was Charles Bernstein reading by candlelight after an electricity cut. Credit should be given to the people who ran the series: Gilbert Adair, Patricia Farrell, Robert Sheppard, Adrian Clarke and Lawrence Upton. The various organizers gave these phases a particular slant but on the whole there was continuity of purpose, that is, providing a forum for experimental work. The spectrum of poets and audience make-up broadened over the years, after what you might call a narrower core of activity. Both situations have validity. I should say a bit more about my own contribution to the series, besides the *Azimuth* launch already mentioned. Also at The White Swan, I read the first draft of *Roxy* which at that time, November 1985, was 11 pages long. I've stated here, 'written for this event'. So literally the occasion inspired me to write that, got me going. Note that I needed something new to read, because it was expected. In March 1988 I read more work from *Roxy* plus the whole of *Southam Street* and parts of *Strip Signals*. Then in December 1989 I launched *Elizabethan Overhang* at The Moon. After I'd spoken about clock mechanics in connection with one of the sonnets Bob Cobbing told me that I didn't need to comment on the work—it could stand on its own. David Marriott urged me to give the line-breaks more definition, that is, in voicing the work. In February 1991 at The Prince George of Cumberland I read for the first time from the unpublished text of *Tilting Square*. There was deep snow, little transport and no heating, so those who came deserved a medal. In July 1993 I did a reading with Alan Halsey at The Three Cups when I read recently written sections of *Roxy*. Alan and I did an extended reading from our recently published *Days of '49* at The Churchill in December 1999. This was videoed by Peterjon Skelt. In July 2002 I read unpublished work from *Le Fanu's Ghost*, including some of the stage-oriented texts, at The Betsey Trotwood. It is interesting to chart these events in relation to the texts I was working on, or had just published, at the time. I would have long conversations with people after these readings. Robert Hampson was a good friend of mine. During the period he was living in Kensal Rise I used to go back to north-west London with him. We would mull over the events of the evening and exchange ideas. We were talking about a process of osmosis in the last session. My sense of the London poetry events that I hadn't witnessed in the 1970s was absorbed via conversations with people like Robert Hampson and Ken Edwards. Of course, comments from poets as they read their work also shaped understanding of texts and background history. There was an occasion at The Three Cups when Colin Simms' commentary took over from the poems themselves. I mean his extended interventions took on a poetic force. If this threatened to overpower the texts themselves it was still fascinating. The SubVoicive situation allowed that, for good or ill. I ought to talk about Writers Forum briefly. The events used to take place at a pub, The Victoria, off Mornington Crescent. The Writers Forum workshop was more experimental and there was more of an expectation of a sound element although I successfully read texts that were not sound poems. One of the people I associate with the Writers

Forum workshop is Adrian Clarke. He and Lawrence Upton were strong presences there at that time as well as Bill Griffiths and Clive Fencott, although Bob Cobbing was the presiding figure. Another poet who came regularly is Johan de Wit. There were also guest readers from time to time, Rothenberg and Paul Dutton, for instance. Writers Forum books and pamphlets were laid out on the pool table, so there was a further circulation aspect.

**AD:** Do we have a date on that?

**GS:** I attended intermittently in the 1980s, early Nineties. Sometimes I offered to assist as another voice, say with a Griffiths text that I hadn't seen before. These were Saturday afternoon sessions which obviously had an influence as far as consciousness was concerned. The King's events were Tuesday evenings. [Discussion of various fixtures in the evenings.] The workshop context invited different textures of writing and performance and there was quite a bit of spontaneous collaboration. Comment was minimal, usually just a nod or a gruff request from Cobbing. Essentially it was a forum where people could air new work. Which brings me to the London Musicians Collective which as we said is further up on the western side [of the track]. It's the line that runs out of Euston and goes through Camden Town. The building was the old British Rail laundry. And it was right adjacent to the railway track. The toilets, such as they were, were often closed and one had to go out and pee adjacent to the fence by the railway track. It was strange, surreal but it was part of the whole daring of the event. There was a pub opposite, on the street side of the building. . .

**AD:** The more delicate and refined people used to go and buy a drink in The Engineer.

**GS:** The physical environment was a key element. The London Musicians Collective was based in a large bare space with, I think, a concrete floor. It had a strange acoustic, slightly echoey. One could put posters up on the wall or pin things to whiteboard stands that could be used to divide or mark out space. LMC was essentially a collective which had begun in the late 1960s or mid 1960s and had migrated to a venue which it shared with the London Film-makers Co-op.

**AD:** It was the same building?

**GS:** Or adjacent parts of the same building. I think the Film-makers Co-Op had to let out space because they couldn't afford the rent for the whole building. I used to go to events at both the Film Co-Op and the Musicians Collective. I went to a lot of music events there and heard people like Paul Burwell and David Toop.

**AD:** Mainly free jazz, basically.

**GS:** Sylvia Hallett and her amazing bow and bicycle wheel. Sue Ferrar, an old friend of mine from York. Steve Beresford also from York. A whole crowd of musicians, interesting people, really pushing out boundaries. Oh, and Frank Chickens.

**AD:** Oh, those Japanese chicks. God that takes me back.

**GS:** It was a kind of pop cabaret that translates into performance art.

**AD:** Did they understand what was going on? Was the incongruity because they weren't Europeans and couldn't really speak English? Or was it really subtle and avant-garde?

**GS:** I think they must have been pretty aware of the ironies inherent in their treatment of material. Playing with musicians such as Clive Bell indicates that dimension.

**AD:** That was always open. A genuinely surprising experience.

**GS:** We're now getting into Camden in its heyday and the energies unleashed during the Thatcher era. I remember going to an Elvis Costello concert at Dingwalls where he had a pumping horn section. He finished with 'Shipbuilding' and 'Oliver's Army', politically thrusting and musically dynamic. The spirit of that somehow carries over to the Frank Chickens, even if it's a different genre. Maybe this is psychogeography. Camden had Irish pubs with folk music, a couple of jazz venues, and residual rock contexts from the 1960s. Anyway, let's get back to the poetry. Bob Cobbing was one of the founders of the Film-Makers Co-Op although I think he had fallen out

with them and was by then no longer involved with film, visibly anyway. He, I think, was the initiator of the Poetry and Music events at the LMC, particularly with the New River Project, which was a kind of umbrella term as well as a publication imprint. They put on a vast range of events including my own *Strip Signals* in two successive years. At the LMC I saw and heard Tom Leonard, Geraldine Monk reading *Long Wake*, Maggie O'Sullivan reading *A Natural History in Three Incomplete Parts*. I also heard Maggie, Bob, Geraldine and Bill Griffiths perform a text called *Rhinestone in the Juju*. Here is a photocopy of a page from *City Limits*, the magazine I used to do regular reviews for. That's a September 1985 issue with a review of Maggie's book. Here is a cutting from January 1985 with my review of the December event at LMC. Bill Griffiths did a Christmas Mummies' Play. Bob Cobbing did 'Kris Kringles Kesmes Korals' and *An ABC in Sound*. Gilbert Adair performed 'steakweasel', a version of the death of Cuchulainn. There was also music. It's a general article about the experimental space, performance, the mixed media event. I note that Patricia Farrell is quoted here as spokesperson for New River Project. I should also mention Jennifer Pike, Bob Cobbing's wife, who did various movement/dance routines. So there was quite a strong female presence. The core group of London poets overlapped with SubVoicive, and I would stress the performative element that is so crucial to the London scene. The musical and movement type-things intersected with 'purer' vocal activity. Poets such as Allen Fisher, Robert Sheppard, Patricia Farrell and Bill Griffiths, who moved away from the capital, retained that orientation. But the LMC was particularly suited to collaborative and mixed media work. Several ALP [Association of Little Presses] events took place there as well, for instance a reading by Rick Caddel and Anthony Barnett in July 1981. Bill Griffiths had a big role in the organization of these. [Pause]

Maybe I could say a couple of things about *Strip Signals*. We got onto that somewhere.

**AD:** What is the title "Strip Signals"?

**GS:** It refers primarily to a German term, "wellensalate". Wave salad. It's a radio term referring to the crossing of stations, the mix of sound as you twist the dial when tuning in. Strip signals has many associations. It obviously conjures up fragmentary experience, but also suggests a sinister technology whereby through chips or whatever your life is being monitored and controlled. The cover of the book has a bar code symbol to indicate the recording of a transaction or the existence of an artefact. Also it's reflective of the juxtaposition of different kinds of writing in that text, which is loose personal experience on the one hand, not necessarily my experience, and analytical technical language on the other. A lot of that is about finance initiatives and at that time—I wrote it in 1985—stuff that was still fantasy, like accounts of going to the Moon before the moon landing. A lot of that has actually come true. We don't yet have barcodes on our wrists but it won't be long. They are talking about doing away with plastic card technology and doing it through your skin or fingerprints or something.

**AD:** Or your retina.

**GS:** The first performance of *Strip Signals* in March 1985 featured two main voices, violin and chorus. The more elaborate performance [July 1986] coincided with the launch of the book. The jazz element was accentuated through the inclusion of Clive Bell and Stuart Jones, as well as Sue Ferrar who had featured the year before. The female voice this time was Bobbie Louise Hawkins, providing an American rather than a German slant. We had just done one rehearsal before and one or maybe two of the performers hadn't been at that rehearsal. So it was pretty improvised and not pre-planned. The text had to be reduced for the event, which still lasted nearly 80 minutes. That is now available on a 2-CD set, *Performance-Texts*. There were two master tapes from different parts of the audience and the engineer had to marry those two tapes. Even then there's a short section missing due to cassette turn-over, the usual problem from those days. One thing people might not realize is that the bell/whirrer/siren which became Cobbing's favourite

instrument is played by me. I'd come across one the week before in a shop in Blenheim Crescent and bought it. Bob was excited by its possibilities and soon acquired one himself. Two other significant series emerged in the 1990s. Firstly, the East-West series run by Drake Stutesman and Thomas Evans. This was a West London venture whereas the others tended to be based in Central or [fractionally] North London. I think it began at the Gate Theatre just off Notting Hill High Street. I did a reading there with Denise Riley in 1992. Other poets who appeared at the Gate include Ken Edwards, Wendy Mulford and Geraldine Monk. The main series was at the East-West Gallery in Blenheim Crescent. In 1995 I did a reading of the complete text of *Roxy* at three different venues, one of them this place. I like reading in art galleries, with visual matter on the wall. It's purer and more formal than a pub and you usually get a different audience. The location also summoned back memories of Notting Hill as the heart of London counter-culture. Despite gentrification there's still some lingering "alternative" presence there. It was an ambitious series. As well as British poets such as Bill Griffiths and Jeff Hilson, a number of visiting Americans were featured. During this period there was also a series called Vertical Images [or VI], run by A.W. [Sandy] Kindness and Mike Diss. based largely at the Victoria, the pub in Mornington Place used by Cobbing. Many London poets read there including myself, Frances Presley and Robert Sheppard. Sandy was a jazz aficionado and I think the performance element was encouraged. Robert and the dancer Jo Blowers did 'Shutters' from his ongoing *Twentieth Century Blues*. You asked about poets and poetry but the scene involves facilitators as well as makers. I should mention a few more link people who feature in this history. Nick Kimberley, who I first met in the late sixties. I got my first Olson texts from Compendium.

**AD:** Nick was the poetry buyer at Compendium.

**GS:** Paige Mitchell worked there as well but I think that was a bit later. This was the late 70s. The poetry fitted in to all the other cultural aspects of the shop, the film section, the sociology section.

**AD:** Politics, post-structuralist philosophy, the whole package.

**GS:** So it was a centre of avant-garde thinking. But eventually Nick left to start his own bookshop, Duck Soup, in Lambs Conduit Passage. John Robinson, who ran Joe DiMaggio Press and introduced me to that album *Azimuth*, supplied a large stapler that I used for the first couple of Binnacle publications. He was also a source of anecdote about the poetry world: elusive figures such as Philip Jenkins and Brian Marley. Gossip can shade into aspects of writing. Asa Benveniste, important as a poet, put me in touch with a lot of people. I met him quite by chance at his bookstall in Camden market in 1978 or 1979 and he invited me round to his house in Leverton Street, Kentish Town. This was all a network of productive contacts. Someone else who provided practical advice and assistance was Jim Pennington, who had been involved in the production of Allen Fisher's books. He also did samizdat editions of important texts—by an American writer—that had "disappeared".

**AD:** Bootleg.

**GS:** Well, he was a printer interested in experimental material. Another significant figure was Richard Adams, who had a press called Open Head and lived around the corner from me in Blenheim Crescent. He had been the designer of *Oz* and now produced a magazine called *The Fanatic*. He was an expert at graphic juxtaposition and offered some useful help. I remember him chatting to me over a saucepan full of cowgum which he was warming up for pasting purposes. On the archive front Geoffrey Soar, who was in charge of the UCL Special Collection, was a useful link-person and a font of knowledge. If you wanted an issue of some fugitive magazine he would usually have it. Conversely I had a standing order for my own publications. Later, David Miller took over and continued the gathering of material. I know the BL used to be envious of what they had. Soar and R. J. Ellis published two valuable articles on British little magazines, one in *British Book News*. I haven't said much about magazines. The crucial London one was *Reality Studios*,

edited by Ken Edwards. That was developing alongside my own involvement in the scene. There was also Robert Sheppard's *Pages* series. Before those the most important critical resource was Peter Hodgkiss' *Poetry Information*.

**AD:** We haven't got many dates here. This is just the raw material for the reconstruction of a cultural milieu.

**GS:** Yes, what I would emphasize is the overlap of 60s/70s counter-culture and seemingly new developments in the 1980s. John Muckle was another key figure. He was the main force behind the Paladin poetry series and should get the credit for that more than Iain Sinclair.

**AD:** Let's just pause on that. John was working for Paladin, to do with editing horror novels I think. He told them, do some contemporary poetry. It was completely his idea, they failed to say no, I think that was about the size of it. John set up the Paladin new British poetry thing and devised the four categories of what the mainstream didn't like. But then he moved on from the job and that is why Iain was managing it when it actually came out.

**GS:** I didn't mean to be critical of Iain. His input later was important. I had a little bit of input into that anthology myself. John was unhappy in a couple of cases about material that had been selected and I acted, to suggest some other material by that writer or writers, and managed to get this accepted by Eric.

**AD:** That was a milestone of a book.

**GS:** It's a curious anthology. The women's poetry section, which was edited by my friend Gillian Allnutt, is a lot more conservative formally but I'm glad it's there nonetheless. It could have been different; it could have been better perhaps. That's probably the way those things had to be presented then.

**AD:** I think it was a trailblazer. I don't think there was a model. It's sad it wasn't followed up more. You could point to it and say, here it is, here's what we are talking about. Whereas quite a few influential people were denying that kind of poetry actually existed. They were saying, yes, there's a theory that you could do this kind of poetry but no one's actually ever done it. When you have a book with 88 poets in it, it saves that kind of argument.

**GS:** I suppose the [Paladin] series of three poets is a kind of successor to the TNBP [*The New British Poetry*] anthology, and if that series had continued many other people from that anthology, and indeed other poets, would have received further exposure. The great thing about those books, at a time when most of the publication for the poets we're talking about was A4 stapled booklets, is they were being presented in a way which meant they could potentially have been received in a more serious way with more serious attention. Although that didn't really happen even with the smarter format.

**AD:** OK, it's like a radical government that's in power for six weeks. I think it did move things on. It's surprising how many people picked up those books before they were pulped.

**GS:** There were several individual volumes, weren't there. Lee Harwood.

**AD:** *Across the Frozen River*?

**GS:** Plus a Christopher Middleton volume, an Ashbery one and the British edition of Raworth's *Tottering State*. I want to return to the interlinked nature of these separate scenes. Another West London person who was very useful to me early on, I think I met him in 1978, was Ian Robinson, who edited the magazine *Oasis*. I'm one of the few people to have visited him at his house in Hammersmith. Office upstairs crammed full of books. There was something strange about my being let in by his wife. I think his wife was Swiss or something. I think he smuggled me upstairs. It was a slightly strange atmosphere, as if he had this den within a more domestic environment controlled by somebody else.

**AD:** A shed? The poetry shed?

**GS:** An indoor shed. Ian was a skilled artist as well as a writer and editor. Another West London

person was Rupert Loydell, who ran Stride Press, who of course lives in Cornwall now. Both Rupert and Ian published me at various points. Other people I should mention are Tom Pickard, who was in London in the late seventies/early eighties, Jeff Nuttall, Michael Horovitz and Roy Fisher. The conjunction of these names brings me back to the tape I mentioned before. I went to a lot of poetry events at the Three Horseshoes in Hampstead. This was a series called Pentameters. Did you go to any of those?

**AD:** Yes, I've read there. It was a completely different set of people from these other things you've mentioned.

**GS:** It was more of a cabaret environment.

**AD:** There'd be songs or comedians between the poems.

**GS:** I referred before to Roy Fisher reading 'Paraphrases' between two jazz performances. There was this total overlap. It was perfectly acceptable. That you have this comedian stuff and amateur jazz and poetry in between. Another person who was important to me at that point was Neil Spencer, editor of *New Musical Express*, who was a huge supporter of what I was doing. He would review Binnacle things in NME. That's one level of interconnection that London permitted. Perhaps this is always so but I would want to emphasise—with regard to the 1980s—the strength of the particular, the local, alongside the universal. There was a broader network of contacts, transatlantic and so on, but there was also that sense of working in a particular city and often a particular part of a city, getting the integrity of feet on the streets of particular pavements and the timbre of voices in particular pubs. Force of detail. But it wasn't parochial in a negative sense, it allowed currents in from elsewhere, whether it be the West Indies or America or maybe the Continent. Although there was never really enough contact with the continent. Until Peter Riley started bringing people from the Continent to the Cambridge Poetry Conference.

**AD:** [In amazement.] Peter Riley?

**GS:** I think Peter Riley started bringing in French poets. . .

**AD:** He used to fight with Kevin [Nolan] to get fewer European poets.

**GS:** Well, I think this is before Kevin came on board, which was later—1997-98. Mind you, I suspect that it was Stephen Rodefer who provided the link, because he was living in Paris.

**AD:** You can ask Kevin about this when he turns up. [Kevin Nolan was scheduled to arrive at 10.30 but arrived at 7.30.]

**GS:** Certainly Kevin opened things up in the late 90s, both in terms of British and Continental poetry. For instance, before Kevin there seems to have been a reluctance to invite London poets to read in Cambridge—with a few exceptions.

**AD:** I don't remember any European poets at SubVoicive ever. That was one of the features of the series. A feature of absence.

**GS:** Actually Harry Hoogstraten performed there, but your main point is right. Michael Horovitz had some contact with Dutch poets. They were brought over in the 1960s. Michael had this brave idea of combining cabaret poetry with projective poetry, in a quieter sense. Poetry Olympics was a less successful version of Pentameters. That said, you could have John Cooper Clarke and then Geraldine Monk or someone on the same bill. There were good events. It galvanised a certain enthusiasm and reached a broader audience, undoubtedly.

**AD:** I am still wondering about the people who go to poetry events at the Royal Festival Hall. How to explain to them why they would want to go to SubVoicive or whatever.

**GS:** It has to do with integrity of space. I don't mean clinging to territory. A poet feeling they can read experimental work and be tolerated. And an audience which is receptive to that. I think on the whole the less formal the nature of the venue the more powerful the performance will be. Poetry readings in the Queen Elizabeth Hall will always seem staged.

**AD:** I've never bothered to go along to them.

**GS:** [GS provides account of Modernist Kensington and the physical proximity of many writers and artists, holds up map he has drawn to chart their location and refers to ‘a sort of underground continuation of this. . . in an oblique line’ to the 1960s.] It’s one of the great things about London, isn’t it, that there are these layers and layers. I referred just now to relationships that extended beyond literary/artistic affiliations. Pound used to mix with half the people he was castigating. I don’t think it would happen now. I think that’s one of the things that’s changed. The gap between the establishment and the avant-garde has become more pronounced. I can’t imagine meeting up with Andrew Motion. I suppose I *could* imagine having a drink with him. But what would I say?

**AD:** Possibly that’s why the literary divides are so wide.

**GS:** I’m sure I could have a decent conversation with him about some aspects of poetry. Comforting, but there would be limits.

**AD:** It’s hard to think about overturning it. It’s easy if you avoid the areas of shared interest. If you’re going to change the map you’re going to have to have an event which explores the differences and tries to reach some kind of agreement.

**GS:** And the danger of mixing with people who hold other literary allegiances is that you just sit in the territory that you do have in common. By talking about areas of shared enthusiasm—with Andrew Motion we could just end up talking about Bob Dylan. I know he’s another fan.

**AD:** It’s quite easy to have civilised chat about recent films or Wordsworth or something. What I’m talking about is a project, which certainly wasn’t invented by me, for truth and reconciliation. Part of that would be developing some kind of agreement about the shared past. That might involve Andrew Motion reading J. H. Prynne.

**GS:** Seriously. With patience.

**AD:** And J. H. Prynne reading Peter Levi. And not coming out with simple condemnation—communist subversion or whatever.

**GS:** Who do they wheel on in these breakfast time Radio 4 debates? They had Iain Sinclair defending Prynne and someone else against him. Was it John Sutherland?

**AD:** It was indeed John Sutherland. He didn’t know what was going on.

**GS:** He doesn’t know anything about contemporary poetry, as far as I know.

**AD:** I actually heard that exchange on the radio. It’s not a very serious hour of the day, you’re buried in toast and marmalade. You want something quite digestible. It wasn’t going to produce anything at all, it wasn’t designed in that way.

**GS:** It would have to be Night Waves or something to generate any serious discussion.

**AD:** I feel tantalised about this project. OK I feel guilty about various aspects of the division, that makes me want to contribute to relieve the guilt, but it would be quite hard to set it up so that it succeeded. It would be quite easy to have an event like that where the two sides simply denounced each other and became more polarised by Sunday evening than they were on Friday night.

**GS:** Frances [Presley] went to an event in Oxford recently to shape a project about John Clare. She was talking with Paul Farley. Found it difficult to converse with him because their views of poetry were so different.

**AD:** I read one of his books. It wasn’t altogether bad but I wasn’t very enthused by it. I did read it to the end. Do you want to get into a particular poem?

**GS:** I’ve thought of something that would be relevant to our discussion of poetry scenes. It’s a long poem that appeared first in *Music’s Duel*. It starts on page 300.

**AD:** ‘Proxy Features’?

**GS:** This is a verse letter to Alan Halsey. It started with some jottings I made in the Tube on the way back from one of the London venues in December. I was thinking about the line of venues

and scenes which we've been discussing today. Then over a period these notes turned into a poem about poets and poetry. There are some specific references to poets here and lot of general musing on what's involved in a poetry world, extending into other aspects of cultural and artistic endeavour. Once I got going, the model I had in mind was poems which deal with poetry and the poetry scene: Drayton's 'Epistle to Henry Reynolds', Suckling's 'A Sessions of the Poets', Jonson's 'At the Mermaid Tavern', Herrick's Ode for Jonson and so on. These include the sense of a coterie, which can be viewed in both positive and negative terms. So rather like a Sydney Graham verse letter it starts 'Dear Alan'. I say that all the poets are wearing T-shirts and trainers and this in December. That's partly about global warming isn't it, but it's also to do with choice of dress, There's a long tradition, addressed in *Roxy*, comparing modes of language and clothing. Here I home in on a literal context that can spark cultural inquiry. Does it matter if you wear a jacket or a cardigan to a poetry event, especially if you're reading?

**AD:** Did you get dragged up? No we just wore casuals.

**GS:** This is an opening gambit, more observation than "view". But I do think there has been a loss of style in masculine dress over the past decade, maybe 15 years. There is a fashion for rather ugly wear including sportswear, which I find rather alienating.

**AD:** Getting less vain possibly.

**GS:** I can understand people wanting to reject consumerism but perhaps female poets negotiate this better than men. I'm not saying that if you're giving a reading you should necessarily dress formally. Anyhow, as well as global warming, I am addressing the way people present themselves for an evening at a poetry reading. It strikes me that particularly in the North people still dress up to go out on a Saturday evening. They don't do that so much down here.

**AD:** In Nottingham on Saturday night you get vast numbers of people all wearing the same fancy dress. It's quite intimidating actually.

**GS:** I can see that it's quite provocative on my part to even raise the question of dress.

**AD:** The scene is completely unselfcritical so you have to be critical in some way. What are proxy features?

**GS:** I'm not sure I can remember!

**AD:** [Aware of his rights as an interviewer.] You selected this poem!

**GS:** It could be things that stand in for other things, or metalanguage. A critical discourse that isn't quite that. Recorded as against live experience. It might be a pun on *Roxy*, with a glance at my previous interrogation of nature and artifice. You see faces reproduced which are just a cartoon version of a face or a mesh of dots. So maybe I was thinking of features which are interestingly different from what you normally see. I shall have to think more about the title. . . There are aspects of the grumpy old man about this opening. I go on to talk about Rob Cowan who is my current *bete noire*. That presenter who has too jolly a voice for the time of day and whose remarks are irritatingly banal. I suppose this typifies a shift in media profile. He's a bit like John Carey, who always has to consult the ordinary man to defend the correct position. So from Rob Cowan I reference Radio 3, 30 years before, with Francis Wilford-Smith's 'Aspects of the Blues', an analysis of blues music in about 8 episodes that I recorded. Wilford-Smith ran Magpie Records, a great blues label based in Bexhill. An avid collector of 78s, he was a key-disseminator of material and a fine broadcaster. He'd studied under John Minton at Camberwell School of Art and subsequently made a living as a cartoonist. Cormac Rigby was a presenter. He became a Catholic priest eventually. I don't know if you remember him?

**AD:** I think he might appear in a poem by Nigel Wheale.

**GS:** He had a wonderful voice. Quite theatrical, not really camp but old-style BBC. He had a very discriminating sense of what is interesting and worthy in music. One programme he presented was 'Byrd at Ingatestone'—consort music, interspersed with poems, from Ingatestone Hall. This

was Sir John Petre's home, where William Byrd was a frequent visitor. So I talk about voices speaking 'in the crevice' or back time. I combine blues imagery with the effect of Byrd's 'Lullaby', which in that concert was preceded by Rigby's reading of 'The Burning Babe' [Southwell]. I should mention in passing that this dovetails with the poem 'Byrd Consort' earlier in *Music's Duel*.

**AD:** Booker is?

**GS:** Bukka White.

**AD:** It's not normally spelt that way.

**GS:** Apparently that's the spelling he preferred, and it was pronounced *Book-er*. . . Anyway, these references reflect interests that Alan and I share. They are private to a degree but I want to make them central to the argument or dialectic. The Wilford-Smith and Rigby programmes are emblematic of a BBC which still retains something of the Reith ethos. A time when the organisation was too autocratic but also more highbrow, that is retaining space for specialist fields like blues music. Now you have Late Junction which is fine but. . .

**AD:** That's a late night, non-classical music programme on Radio 3.

**GS:** You might get particular blues songs featured but you wouldn't get much extended analysis or air-play on Radio 3 now. There's too much anxiety about a target audience, instead of letting interest develop. Thinking about ways in which the poetry world has become more casual leads me to think about other cultural references there. That leads me back to what must be a particular moment in the reading I'd just been to. Someone uses his mobile, another pings away to get a picture—distractions but also the poetic as ordinary event. I want to stress the latter since this poem isn't a nostalgic complaint. 'The buttons I see/get smaller'. I'm quite fond of that play on words: either the physical devices are smaller or they seem so as your eyesight deteriorates. The Japanese, particularly, seem attracted to miniature control features. Take this recorder compared with earlier non-digital models: they promise so much in terms of extra capacity and operation but actually they are far more awkward to handle and fraught with risk. On the other hand, I look at my niece and nephew and they swing with these things. So we come back to habit. . . I was talking a lot about poetic craft before and the line break here is an example of this.

**AD:** The 'see' functions in two different ways?

**GS:** It throws the emphasis onto 'see' doesn't it. I could just make a general point about the form of this poem. It's quite carefully crafted and, as a result, it may be a bit stiff. On the other hand I felt like doing that at the time so I think that's justification enough. I've written in much looser modes at other moments. I'm very aware that people tend to imitate others sometimes in a slavish way. So I think there's satire of that in what follows. People who feel they need to do something because it seems the way to go.

**AD:** Which lines are we looking at?

**GS:** 'There's only one speedo/on the scene holds his heart and why/be him'. That's specifically Tom Raworth.

**AD:** Because he reads very fast?

**GS:** I don't in any way wish to denigrate what he does. I think it's extraordinary. He's one of the five or ten major poets in our time.

**AD:** . . . [Inaudible] reads very rapidly and indifferently presumably because he wants to be Tom but actually sounds like he was bored by his own work.

**GS:** Well, this isn't a criticism of him, just the assumption of a model. And I'm not talking about people imitating a single individual, although 'heart' would be a clue that I had Raworth in mind.

**AD:** So the 'Purple Heather'. . . is that a folk tune? Mimi Farina recorded it?

**GS:** It's an Irish song derived from a Scottish one. 'Wild Mountain Thyme' is the usual title but it's also known as 'Purple Heather'. That is probably something that drifted up from the bar

downstairs during the reading.

**AD:** I see. At an upstairs room in a pub.

**GS:** Then I start talking about memory and the ways memory is preserved, such as readings and music on tape. The 'little cases' are cassettes but I didn't want that word, it's too literal, I wanted cases to suggest other things as well as cassettes. So I said 'little cases'. All that stuff is quite technical, such as the 'oxide print' on recorded tape.

**AD:** It's on metal oxide. Chrome or ferric.

**GS:** The chinagraph is an instrument that was used to cut or splice tape. There are kind of generalisations about literature or poetry in this poem that might be doctrinaire but I didn't mean them to be absolute. When I say 'You remember and expect' and 'the instant isn't the one/over your shoulder, it's somewhere ahead' I didn't want it to come over too absolute. And then the 'Martin' is Martin Corless-Smith who I'd recently talked to, and heard again this past December. We were talking about Auden, who tends to represent a closed mode that we don't find useful and which stands in the way of other things. On the other hand he is still a force to be reckoned with and I don't think he should be left out of any university course. Martin told me he does still teach Auden. I say 'a snatch of Auden', so it may be just one poem. In this stanza I'm putting forward the possibility that what modernism threw out can now be reclaimed partially. In the slipstream of modernism with less danger of getting stuck, or less danger of oppression. The 'childwords' reference is probably a play on Francis James Childe and child language.

**AD:** As if child's play was the ballads collected by Childe.

**GS:** Perhaps I'm suggesting that there's structure in what seems unrefined, or just stressing the persistence of a song impulse. The verb 'depend' suggests "hang down" but there's also the time aspect of 'suspend' [before 'come through']. Then there's the sense of reliance. Maybe 'childwords' are basic units of language, like ribs on a leaf. . . It's very difficult to explain a poem logically, isn't it. I'm finding it quite difficult. I can give you a general sense but getting down to specific commentary is quite difficult even for me as the writer. It's probably that I want to let it go. When you've finished writing something you want to let it go.

**AD:** [Encourages more commentary.]

**GS:** As long as there's a proviso that A, I may not be able to remember what I intended, B I don't want to close off meanings. Partly because this is a verse letter to Alan Halsey, section 2 concerns a generation of poets born in the 1940s or early 50s. You could say between 1948 and 1954. I'm talking about what it feels like to have come 'Out of war or the next heroic'. We 'bear a dual stamp, doomed/to kick against the harsh stead/that gives us a measure of ease/and driven despite to build/a glassy frame which all can climb—/green in lingering dirt.' I think I'm musing about the way in which most people born in that period were brought up very strictly. We were 'doomed/to kick against' that. Yet, despite a desire for ease, we were driven to build alternative structures, counter-cultural equivalents if you like. The dream of a freer society.

**AD:** So that's the glassy frame?

**GS:** I wonder if that might be a reference to the exhibition of 1951, you know, on the South Bank?

**AD:** The Festival of Britain?

**GS:** Or primarily I might be talking about something in the 1960s.

**AD:** Somehow modern buildings have much more glass and concrete.

**GS:** I was probably thinking of light and airy structures that are fragile, like a glass pyramid. Then I talk about writing as a form of action. 'Our history is walking/on the page', adventures in print culture. There may be an implied parallel with seventeenth century contexts, since I associate 'marvel'—at one level 'Marvell'?—with survival strategy. 'Wire lines' are those semi-invisible criss-cross lines you get on laid paper. McKerrow talks about this in his book on Bibliography.

**AD:** It's the frame you press the pulp into so the frame isn't part of the page but there would be a

trace of it.

**GS:** Some of this reminds me of *Roxy*, actually. The timbre where I'm providing epigrammatic statements about culture which in an 18th century poem might be absolute but I hope in a post-modern poem or whatever would, to a degree, be treated as open-ended. [I hate the term post-modern. I was going to say modernist but. . . let's just say of our era, with layers of approach.] These epigrammatic generalizations are as it were in inverted commas, inviting debate. 'Any marvel drawn on wire lines' calls up 'a force to survive.'

**AD:** Because it's printed.

**GS:** That might be equivalent to what I was saying about tape. There's wear and decay but a prospect of survival, at least by transfer. Then the next stanza returns to the ecological theme: 'Can't get careless in a lane smothered by plastic/or a thorium-steeped stream'.

**AD:** The thorium would be radioactive spill from a nuclear waste container or a power station maybe?

**GS:** I think here I'm suggesting that if you're writing you must have a moral sense at some level. It's all very well to dismiss absolutes and boring clarities, but you need a grounded sense of phenomena. Actually I'm juxtaposing possibilities here, considering shades of endeavour. 'Don't like to fix/what is right for health', don't like to lay the line down, but there are things that we have to care about. Another generalisation follows: 'there's a way to behave which allows/adventure and doesn't tie the lurching/spirit. A feel for the scape of things'. Scape in the sense of landscape but also scope, seeing, measuring. This is all to do with being of a certain generation, feeling the contradictions, largely between form as an arranged or precise thing and form as discovery. You can say the whole poem is about that, actually. This section is a lot about nature and landscape, isn't it. Was I thinking. . . No, this would have been before the Olympics site was developed, but maybe equivalent things were happening, the exploitation of land for supposedly grand civic purposes but actually destructive of a certain wilderness. An allowed wilderness.

**AD:** Do we have a year for this?

**GS:** It was begun in December 2007 and finished in March 2008. I know this because Alan's response to the text is the earliest email I retain on my computer. The poem was written in several phases over that quarter.

**GS:** In section 3 I deal again with form and the nature of words and sounds. I refer to two poets in detail: Maggie O'Sullivan and Geraldine Monk, both reading in the same room. On separate occasions. I tried to imitate Maggie's sense of language, but when I say imitate, it's not at all imitative of her. I tried in my own way to create a kind of equivalent for her use of language. It doesn't look like a Maggie O'Sullivan poem at all, and anyway I'm sticking to a regular, left hand margin throughout this poem. So the words are not dispersed and behaving like creatures as she makes them do. And similarly in my description of Geraldine's work, there's approximation via another mode. The Maggie stanza draws on nursery rhyme, which I discussed earlier. The Geraldine stanza references *Interregnum*, a text based around the Lancashire witch trials held in Pendle, Lancashire. I turn the place name into a verb. Then there's a glancing reference ['mariole/traces'] to her later book *Escafeld Hangings*. The phrase 'Mysterious so', with the business about 'ivories', plays on Thelonious Monk's 'Misterioso'. I think Alan had already done something similar in a poem.

**AD:** The two Monks, eh?

**GS:** So it's a kind of homage to Alan as well as Geraldine there. After this appreciation of types of verbal "magic", the next section [4] reverts to disapproval. Can't tell you who on earth I was thinking of, I literally can't remember. 'Now a happy proser/pulls the drape. His movie might/be adverts'.

**AD:** So he's pulling the curtain back before he appears to perform?

**GS:** Actually performing in a drab uninteresting way. ‘The April scroll’ is Kerouac’s scroll for *On the Road*. ‘Wouldn’t wish to smear the April scroll’—wouldn’t want to smear the spontaneous way of writing. ‘To sound like yourself/is a strange meander. And yet that’s just/how the blacktop score evolves’.

**AD:** The black top would be ‘on the road’? Asphalt. . .

**GS:** You see, I need you to prompt me there.

**AD:** Look, I’m supposed to ask the questions around here!

**GS:** I needed a trigger to see what I was getting at. This has to do with writing as a mixture of spontaneity and craft, which is the case with *On the Road*. The scroll came out of earlier stuff and was itself edited. That’s what the ‘proser’ might be better doing. Now I come back to music: ‘It’s a good-for-nothing ear/that’ll not hear how a dance is done/before any instrument. Bare instinct/prods the nerve and bone into play, later grunts will tally.’ Trusting instinct, as in Renaissance airs and blues music. The lines about poetry coming more slowly these days stem from a conversation I had with Maggie O’Sullivan about our writing habits, in this respect the same. The stanza beginning ‘Inside the noughties’ is all about what was going on then: ‘wars are buried while feel on demand/piles goods into the arena’. Wars here may be those conducted with smart weapons in remote places or divisions within the poetry world which have disappeared [that is, perhaps, smoothed over]. Ready consumer access includes print-on-demand books that make publication easier, with the drawback that a flood of titles can disperse attention. You’ll notice the sequence of alternate short and long lines here. I must have done it for a couple of lines and then thought, that’s interesting, I’ll continue that, to embody the dialectic. I speak of ‘getting the shape and throb’ which, if you read back in this section, might be a balance of precision and looseness. . . Ah! You know what I forgot to tell you. I started writing this on an envelope, having recently received an invitation from Rupert Loydell to submit something for his manifesto book [Rupert Loydell, ed., *Troubles Swapped for Something Fresh* [Salt Publications]. By the time I’d finished he’d given up on me and said, I’ll use a section of *Roxy* instead. As well as being a verse letter for Alan, this was conceived as a public piece. It’s a meditation which implies an agenda.

**AD:** I’ve read that book.

**GS:** Well, this should have been in it. We were told we could only submit two pages, or at least something relatively brief.

**AD:** It’s hard for an editor to turn something down that they really like. He invited a very large number of people and if they’d all done ten pages it would have been a millstone.

**GS:** So it was partly written for an anthology with the working title *Manifesto!* But it’s a manifesto that debates. I call it an anti-manifesto. Rather as in *Roxy*, when I make an absolute statement it’s then undercut by something else. Section 5 has a lot of detail about pub readings—the public house as a space for interaction. ‘A beer ring on the table/shows how writers relate.’ In the background or by analogy people play billiards or pool: ‘Good company’s a baize surface/where balls shoot into the net.’ I’m talking about comradeship here but also competition. That persists inevitably in the poetry world, going back to those 17th century times.

**AD:** It sounds a bit like Steve McQueen and Edward G. Robinson in *The Cincinnati Kid*.

**GS:** That film and *The Hustler* would be relevant in terms of generational rivalry, and this part is quite cinematic. But the image of the world as a game is I think adapted from Byron [*Don Juan*, canto XIII]. *Don Juan* deals sharply with the poetry world, and Byron would be an influence at some points here, as he was for *Roxy*. But those Renaissance figures I was talking about are not primarily satirical. They provide more affectionate examinations of the social world of poetry. . . I come back to a season context and the human parallel: ‘So much is staked’ etc. It was an incredibly mild winter but even that is threatening. A poet might become fraught with anxiety. After criticism they might not want to relate anything to the world, like a brave peeking bud that

gets a nip. The next stanza evokes late night philosophy, which could be talk after a reading: 'Worlds on a pinhead dazzle. . . collide'. In performance terms—to mix metaphors—it would be a tightrope walk to get things right. Butcher Row, off the Strand, contained a house with crown and fleur-de-lis emblems that was supposed to have been the French Ambassador's residence. This has been disproved but I was attracted to the juxtaposition of butcher and fleur-de-lis, the savage against the soft and lyrical. Particularly since Giordano Bruno may have been there as a spy. Bruno was in constant conflict with authority but also, philosophically, advocated the interpenetration of opposite energies. Now, as I look at it, 'staked' anticipates the Bruno allusion. To realize itself a thing must invoke its opposite: 'every banjaxed ink-slinger will hug an impish figure.'

**AD:** Every writer who's been hit by something will hug the devil?

**GS:** Or even the person who's criticised them at some stage.

**AD:** So the banjaxing is someone criticising your immortal work? When you've drunk enough you embrace them?

**GS:** I say in a more positive and gracious way, 'What lyric feasts have gone down'.

**AD:** Goster?

**GS:** It's gabble. Kind of crowded talk. This is relevant to what we were saying before about SubVoicive. . . a situation that allows ferment: 'So often we've ventured the newest fare/breathed, warmed, ignited. Given or bartered' etc.

**AD:** So it hasn't been printed yet?

**GS:** I was definitely thinking of reading unpublished material there, passing things round. The last section begins 'It's time to sign off.' The fourth line has a play on fit 'stanza' and fit 'things that fit'. Then I start talking about ways in which craft and associations are passed on, almost without one realising it, through personal contact: 'beaming through generations.' As a young child, Robert Graves used to be patted on the head by Swinburne when they met on Wimbledon Common.

**AD:** Johnson. Was he alive when Queen Anne was on the throne?

**GS:** Graves came to discover that Queen Anne touched the young Dr Johnson, who in turn patted Landor on the head. Swinburne experienced a 'shock of adoration' when he encountered Landor in Florence. So Graves had this ritual sense of lineage, or at least it's a fine anecdote. I then refer to Swinburne meeting Wordsworth at Rydal Mount, when Wordsworth grudgingly admitted that he [himself] had written some decent stuff. Most of the rest of this last section refers to Alan Halsey's *Lives of the Poets*, which I saw and heard parts of, before it was published. It seemed likely it would be published by Five Seasons Press, which indeed it was. Hence the lives 'crave a fifth season of store'. But remember the poem begins in winter. . . 'I'll clear the stockpile now and just say/you meet those spirits coming up the stairs like bees'. That's from a book by Aubrey, not *Brief Lives*, one of his miscellaneous pieces.

**AD:** There's a book called 'Miscellanies'. It's about X-files, really, inexplicable events. So there would be spirits in it.

**GS:** Oh, no, I'm wrong. It's from Aubrey's life of Thomas Allen, the Oxford mathematician who knew Dee and Harriot. He had a reputation for unorthodoxy and I think the "bee" anecdote is to do with playful familiarity with the occult, or being promoted for this. Then I almost end by saying that Alan has 'no truck with any -ite or -doxy'.

**AD:** Like ortho-doxy?

**GS:** I think Alan feels, like me, that one shouldn't align with any group, or absolute perspective on poetry. And then the last stanza returns to the question of costume: style at a reading, in relation to the process of writing.

**AD:** 'Staves the range' is like 'don't fence me in'?

**GS:** The language here is quite Metaphysical. Like those 17th century poets. And indeed Martin Corless-Smith, who writes in a quite similar mode I think to the 17th century. So right at the end of this poem I come back to the aspect of manifesto. But it's tentative rather than absolute with the image of a poetic agent whispering in the glass of red wine 'over and out.' Maybe this is a 'proxy' manifesto, not a real manifesto but standing in for such. Yet I don't think it can be, because I'm putting my heart into it, in layers of experience and shared concern.

**AD:** I got the general drift of the poem when I read it but I didn't get the title at all. I think it's about 250 lines long. Quite complex.

**GS:** There are dense passages which I suppose reflect a conflicted consciousness, and after all this is a big area—I won't say topic—to address. Do you think the piece could have fitted into Rupert's anthology?

**AD:** Oh, sure. It would have. . . The book didn't come off all that well. The people who wanted to contribute didn't. . . they were a bunch of people I hadn't heard of, to be quite honest. I don't think he tried hard enough, if you want to produce a good book you have to fight with people who are reluctant to commit themselves. If you get a bunch of people who are under-publicised that's a symptom of something, unfortunately. So this would have been quite an asset for that book.

**GS:** I think it's fairly unusual in the world we inhabit for someone to produce a formal discussion of poetry in that way.

**AD:** What people tend to do is wheel on theory instead, pulled down from canonical texts. Deeply evasive.

## Appendix One

### An email from Gavin Selerie to Andrew Duncan preparing ground for the first interview

Andrew,

Many thanks. I've just got back from a film fair (part of my endless pursuit of mainly British B films from the 30s through to the 60s). Can't resist saying that I finally got my hands on the British original *They Drive By Night* (1938) which is usually ignored in favour of the later American noir.

Your essay, which I've quickly scanned, contains much that we could discuss. Including the 'stiffening' in *Tilting Square*. Perhaps *Elizabethan Overhang*, the first book of sonnets, somewhat avoids this. But it was part of the cultural landscape of that 80s decade, stretching a little in the 90s.

Where did this essay appear then?

Coincidentally, yesterday I tracked down the origin of that quote re. *Azimuth*. It's from your review of *Days of '49* in *Terrible Work* 10 (2000).

On the question of music, I'd like to speak about the influence of various genres on my whole attitude to writing and the structure of books. I took on board what Bunting said about the musical structural analogy for *Briggflatts*. I had a fondness for what would now be called Early Music, down to early 18th century. And understood what he suggested about the sonata form in particular. But alongside that I was very influenced by what is now often dismissed as the concept album. E.g. I appreciated the Who's sequence 'A Quick One' (1966), sometimes regarded as a precursor of *Sergeant Pepper*, and then zanier things like Jefferson Airplane, *After Bathing at Baxter's*. But also Jazz suites and the whole fluency that you get in, say, Coltrane's performances at the Village Vanguard. Also very relevant to *Azimuth*: the climate in which one night you would go to Cousins (Les Cousins) in Greek Street to hear Bert Jansch and then the next night go to hear John Mayall, with Clapton and later Peter Green, at Klook's Kleek in West Hampstead. Then another week to Tiles in Oxford Street to hear Steampacket (Long John Baldry with all kinds of people that later became famous such as Rod Stewart) or Geno Washington and the Ram Jam Band, the Yardbirds at the Marquee, and then another night some jazz or blues at the Flamingo. I saw John Surman, who I still listen to frequently. I saw Joe Harriott with John Mayer (Indo-Jazz Fusion) at the Isle of Wight Festival, the day after Dylan's appearance, in the rain. Oh and lest I forget many female performers such as Sandy Denny, Anne Briggs, Jo Ann Kelly—I mean at venues around the country.

One record I played to death was *Anthems in Eden*, the Shirley & Dolly Collins album, where they collaborated with David Munrow, Christopher Hogwood, the Skeapings etc. This had an enormous influence on me.

And, dare I say it, as a Floyd fan from the beginning (1967 at least), I went to one of the 1972

Rainbow concerts where they unveiled *Dark Side of the Moon*, much more fluid as I recall than the album released 6 months later. Which has become such a cliché. Frances Presley says she remembers it as the album always put on in bed! Or, as she puts it, music to make out to, by which to make out. But there was ambition there in making that sequence and some interesting bits of happenstance. Tape loops and people wondering in and putting stuff down. Anecdotes, confessions. Abbey Road where I spent the first five years of my life (literally).

How to sort that alongside my devotion to more genuinely experimental work by Soft Machine and Kevin Ayers/David Bedford. The LATE David Bedford much missed. Ian Carr's Nucleus, Lol Coxhill, who stayed in my big communal house in Yorkshire after a gig. Pete Brown's Battered Ornaments. Mike Taylor, who also collaborated on Cream stuff. Almost forgot Jack Bruce, who I saw on numerous occasions, one of which at Oxford Town Hall with Tony Williams's Lifetime, nearly destroyed my hearing.

This was all part of the mix in thinking about writing, or at least doing it. The point here: not just the music as music but as a way of being/working, making sense of the world. A moment when all kinds of artistic endeavour were linked. Have you read J. Maclaren-Ross's film reviews? Quite revealing, I think, but he was thinking a little more in a vacuum. Fitzrovia anticipates the 60s explosion??

Gavin

## Appendix Two

### Incomplete list of poets that Gavin Selerie heard read in Oxford during 1969

Christopher Logue  
Don Gardner  
Paul Roche  
Adrian Henri  
Pablo Neruda  
Nathaniel Tarn  
Elizabeth Jennings  
Harry Guest

Selerie also heard Barry MacSweeney read in late 1968 (see interview) and Kathleen Raine (at some point, 1968-71).

## Appendix Three

### Some Appraisals of Gavin Selerie's Work

'Gavin Selerie (1949-) is a prolific and enigmatic writer who has [...] been part of the London avantgarde scene for possibly 30 years without being accepted by the chief ideologues as forming a key part of that scene. His poetry is mainly in long forms organised around multiple interlocking themes and drawing on a vast range of research and achieving an extraordinary documentary density. I suppose it is an extension of 'open field' poetry [...]. Selerie has identified himself as a lover of digressions, someone who knows all the back streets of London. If we think of the antiquary as someone with an insatiable curiosity for the past, who can conjure up entire scenes from stray objects, we can define Selerie as an antiquary of the present. His intake of information is simply wider than that of most writers.'

Andrew, Duncan (2010), <http://angelexhaust.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/handlist-of-late-20th-century-poets.html>

Further relevant commentary and appraisal may be found at:

<http://jacketmagazine.com/36/r-selerie-rb-hampson.shtml>

[www.fiveseasonspress.com/#hariotdouble](http://www.fiveseasonspress.com/#hariotdouble)

<https://glasfrynproject.org.uk/.../gavin-selerie-ekphrasis-and-beyond-visual-art-in-poet...>

**GAVIN SELERIE** was born in London, where he still lives. His major publications are:

*Azimuth* (1984); *Puzzle Canon* (1986); *Strip Signals* (1986); *Elizabethan Overhang* (1989); *Southam Street* (1991); *Tilting Square* (1992); *Roxy* (1996); *Danse Macabre* [collaborative work] (1997); *Days of '49* [with Alan Halsey] (1999); *Le Fanu's Ghost* (2006); *The Canting Academy* [collaboration] (2008); *Music's Duel: New and Selected Poems 1972-2008* (2009); *Hariot Double* (2016). A *Collected Sonnets* is forthcoming.

His work has appeared in anthologies such as *The New British Poetry* (1988), *Other: British & Irish Poetry since 1970* (1999) and *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (2008).

Critical work includes studies of Charles Olson and Edward Dorn, and the *Riverside Interview* series with poets, including Allen Ginsberg. An essay on his long-term collaboration with Alan Halsey is included in Nigel Wood ed., *Fugue & Subterfuge* (2017). 'Jumping the Limits: the interaction of art forms at Black Mountain & beyond, including UK practice' will shortly appear on the *Junction Box* site.

Some of the issues covered in the interview also feature in Selerie's essay 'Kaleidoscope of Spirits', published in *Clasp: late modernist poetry in London in the 1970s*, ed. Robert Hampson and Ken Edwards (2016).

Literary papers, including drafts and journals, are to be held in the Gavin Selerie archive at Lincoln College Oxford (ref. LC/450)—currently in process.

**ANDREW DUNCAN** lives in Nottingham. Has written a seven-volume series on late 20th C British poetry (1960 to 1997). With Tim Allen, co-edited *Don't Start Me Talking*, a book of interviews with poets.