

torrance

CHRIS TORRANCE interviewed by Peter Hodgkiss

at Glynmercher Isaf, Thursday 15th September 1977

The interview was conducted at Chris Torrance's cottage situated in the Vale of Neath, South Wales. It represents a distillation of about two hours of taped conversation. In order to present the information as coherently and concisely as possible most of the false starts, repetition, and circumlocution have been edited by Chris and myself.

- Peter Hodgkiss -

PH: How did you bring yourself to poetry?

CT: From my earliest childhood I'd always been a complete bookworm, reading anything and everything that came my way, but I took to poetry at quite a late stage, at 22, after many attempts at writing short stories, science fiction and thriller-type novels. I had wanted to be a jazz pianist, but as this ambition was firmly frustrated at home, I replaced that attempted mode of expression with writing. I've kept a diary since 1954. But what really took me out was meeting up with a fairly anarchic bunch of literary hooligans in the back bar of the Greyhound, Carshalton in the early '60s. We decided to pool our efforts and money and start a little mag which we called ORIGINS-DIVERSIONS. I had already answered an advertisement for a mag called SCREECHES FOR SOUNDING in the NEW STATESMAN, and was soon in correspondence with the editor of SCREECHES..., Dave Cunliffe, who went on to produce the many trail-breaking issues of POETMEAT. But the ORIGINS crowd was basically an isolated cell, an outpost - we weren't in physical contact with any other groups; but starting a little mag soon put us in touch with people, especially when we began running readings as well. There was a surge of "underground poetry" from various sources as the influence of Ginsberg and the other beats became felt, and in the context of the burgeoning influence of CND at the time. Michael J. Dyke, the other main co-editor of ORIGINS-DIVERSIONS, and I, used to take a summer tour around the country, reading up at West Hartlepool with the ICONOLATRE crowd, and then going over to see Dave Cunliffe and Tina Morris in Blackburn, and Jim Burns in Preston. Then it was down South again to Bristol, and Ian Vine. A most important contact was with Lee Harwood, who was living in the East End at the time, and was running magazines and readings. Lee came up to see us in Carshalton first, but I was soon spending time with him in Wellclose Square and also in Betterbooks.

PH: He was one of your earliest influences? In what way?

CT: He appeared as a light and free and easy figure who I'd meet once or twice a week. He always had new books to show me - things that he was immediately enthusiastic about; and in that way he spread a lot of influences in my direction - he sold me my first copy of NOVA EXPRESS by William Burroughs at a time when I was very interested in collage technique, in language, and was trying to write poems by dropping random sentences into a hat and literally just drawing them out in that order, although I subsequently was never satisfied with that - I went on to insist on some sort of order. Anyway, Lee's pourings into my consciousness were perhaps of the continental, surreal influence which I couldn't appreciate directly because I've never been very fluent at foreign languages - I certainly couldn't read in the original French - but I think it's fair to say that this was reflected in Harwood's work at that time: this surreality, this continental influence. His appreciation of paintings which combines so beautifully

with Ashbery as an early influence on his work; and of course the New York, so called surreal poets generally. So that was something he was bringing into one perceptive edge of my consciousness. He was also operating in the centre of the London milieu which I wasn't, and he was my vital link with new publications, with the turnover of literary ideas, with what was fashionable and new. I never fully linked in to the London scene - I read at Betterbooks two or three times, once with Lee organising - the Dada retrospective thing - and once with the ORIGINS-DIVERSIONS crowd, who had a special night there. It was through Lee that I started to get my first public readings away from the very local scene which ORIGINS-DIVERSIONS were organising in various places in the London/Surrey area.

PH: Would you say your relationship with Lee has changed over the years?

CT: I wouldn't say that it has changed drastically, but I think I've seen Lee himself change - he's been through a number of scenes which have been entirely different from my experience: there's his transatlantic tours, and he's met a lot more of the American poets direct and on their own ground, whereas I've chosen to retreat from relatively cosmopolitan centres, i.e. Bristol and London, into a pastoral position.

PH: Let's get back to your early poetic progress...

CT: A major influence on me at this time - the mid-'60s - was the acquisition from a second-hand bookstall of the Don Allen anthology, *THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY 1945-60*, which I bought merely because I recognised the names Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso, Snyder, Ferlinghetti in it. I had no idea who these other people were - Olson, Creeley, Duncan, and all the others - but I supposed I had better read them, as I'd bought the book... paid 14 shillings for it, in fact. Well, this other stuff, the Black Mountain/open field poetry, really started to get to me after a while, and I got very involved in the essays and biographies at the end, the statements on poetics. And this opened the way for me, from being completely untutored but willing to work at the writing of poetry, to a verisimilitude of technique, a structure to back my own impulse to express myself freely and spontaneously; to work on that spontaneity until I could tighten it up sufficiently for it to do its work in the world...I was also discovering at that time, Dr Williams' great experiment PATERSON, and formulated the ambition to go into longer serial things, employing geography, history, etc... purveying information as well as emotion in the poem, writing about things in a territorial manner. This was what prompted me into beginning 'The Carshalton Poems' in my first volume GREEN ORANGE PURPLE RED.

PH: So you found the Americans had more to say?

CT: Than the established English poets, anyway, the Movement boys who didn't interest me at all; and the whole classic tradition, which I scarcely knew anything about. But what really gave me heart was my introduction, through Lee Harwood, to the poetry broadsheet, *THE ENGLISH INTELLIGENCER*, run out of Cambridge by Andrew Crozier and Jeremy Prynne. As though this was some kind of inspirational bolt from the blue, I found myself starting to write specifically for it, under the influence of the open field poetics I mentioned earlier, and now the revelation that there were any number of other young British poets who had also absorbed that influence in various ways, and were now taking it further through their own areas. There were people very intent on the geography, the geology and the history, and there were linguistic essays, letters and arguments as well. I found it very inspiring even though I found a lot of the writing in *THE ENGLISH INTELLIGENCER* very difficult. Peter Riley to me was often a difficult writer, and often still is, Jeremy Prynne another; but somehow these difficulties were a challenge - I had no academic or structural background apart from this influence I was picking up in my twenties, but I could feel the integrity of structure under the difficulties.

PH: So this was poetry as investigation rather than poetry as an easily assimilable art form?

CT: Yes. And it was about this time that I started sending Andrew Crozier the first page-long drafts for the series of poems that eventually became 'The Carshalton Poems' from GREEN ORANGE PURPLE RED.

PH: You started off writing about jazz, didn't you?

CT: Yes, I wrote about jazz for a left-wing paper called YOUNG GUARD which was representative of a breakaway group of Young Socialists, and was at the time edited by a fellow who I understand is now a successful telly media man - Gus McDonald. It was as democratic and open as anything was likely to be in those days; editorial control was light and guided by the consensus of opinion reached at readers meetings. I wrote libertarian articles on jazz, drugs and social issues, but the libertarianism got a bit too much for them and I was quietly dropped. I wrote a few letter-articles for FREEDOM and sold the paper along with that other excellent publication ANARCHY, while listening to the anarchist orators up at Hyde Park Corner. Some of us even started a Surrey Anarchist Group which lasted for 6 months, at which stage we broke up because we thought we'd been infiltrated! I never was much good at blowing up bridges anyway!

PH: Has jazz influenced your writing, and your performance of your own work?

CT: One of the reasons I started to write poetry, was that I wanted to try and describe jazz and the effect jazz was having on me, and this was leading me into poetic flights... I felt I wanted to capture a bop, hip lyric that imitated the stance and phrasing of the tenor sax player blowing an endless line of improvisation. When it came to my first public appearances I tried to phrase and pace along like a loping tenor sax soloist such as Dexter Gordon or Lester Young. I heard snatches of "jazz-&-poetry" such as Kenneth Patchen with West Coast jazzmen, and the Logue "Red Bird" stuff, but I don't think it grabbed me immediately. But you could place plenty of jazz influence at the ORIGINS-DIVERSIONS readings, sometimes 2 poets onstage together swapping "fours", plenty of poems to individual jazz musicians. I think I felt this was a good way of getting away with unequal line lengths - just pitch into it until you got the wave and punch of it right - sometimes I was writing long Ginsbergian lines and sometimes short, cool, open-ended things. I didn't work with any musicians at that stage. Later on, when I met Barry Edgar Pilcher in Cardiff, and joined his band DRAGON'S BLOOD, I found myself working in a specifically poetry-&-music outfit, the dialectic concept perhaps being that of poetry-&-music as vector, between poem, as lyric and music, and music as aural, harmonic sensation. I found this experience very educational, to say the least, but tough going at times, because I never really have been a musician, have never possessed the disciplines of a musician, and I was the only non-musician in that band. I can only think of one other "poetry-&-music" band with which we might be compared, the group called UNDERCURRENT PRODUCTIONS who gigged with Gael Turnbull; but Barry's band always had a mystic, Eastern component, that coupled with free-style improvisation, whereas I think it's fair to say UNDERCURRENT PRODUCTION's direction was more mainstream-folk. But although poetry-&-music can be done convincingly, I don't see that it can really take on a major role - it falls between that seriousness and penetration of poetry and that more innerly ecstatic mood of "pure music" - and ne'er the twain shall quite meet; or they meet best as song, which puts it firmly into the sphere of music anyway.

PH: All through this early period you were writing for small mags?

CT: Yes, jazz poetry very often; and after publishing a few things in ORIGINS-DIVERSIONS I started to look around, as it seemed a bit of a sinecure to be publishing things in my own mag - so I started placing stuff in '60s mags such as ICONOLATRE, MOVE, BOHEEM E UM, as well as POETMEAT. With the help of Lee Harwood, I published two "one-off" anthologies called CITY OF TEARS and DIARY OF AN ASSASSIN, which was a way of getting my first attempts at a linked series or sequence into circulation. I sent some stuff to Brian Patten's UNDERDOG but he sent it back with a very kind letter to the effect that I'd better learn how to present correctly typed manuscripts to magazines....!

PH: What sort of full-time work were you doing at the time of your first collection?

CT: I had dropped out of the legal profession - I had been a legal executive for 7 years in various City, West End and suburban offices before I dropped out and became a grasscutter for Carshalton Urban District Council, following the example of quite a few of the ORIGINS-DIVERSIONS crowd. This was an extremely important step for me as I found I was responding immediately to the relaxedness and informality of working in the outdoors, and being sent to various localities to work.

PH: Yes, you seem to be reacting in the poems in GREEN ORANGE PURPLE RED in a direct way to a sort of natural environment.

CT: Yes, there was an incredible sense of release and physical expansion, and, of course, the work wasn't particularly demanding, it never was in those Macmillan days; there was no pressure, and there was plenty of time to cast about getting in touch with some of the ancient characters around the place who could remember when this area of Wandleside was much more rustic and integral and under the pastoral influence of market gardening activities that supplied the big town London up yonder - such things as the lavender and mint and general herb farms down at Mitcham, snuff mills in Carshalton, various waterways and conduit systems that were constructed by Regency entrepreneurs with second homes out in the "country"... I was discovering all this through the palimpsest revealed by my mowing virtually every blade of grass in the district, by seeing where things were new and raw, or old and notchy. So, the job enabled me to suss out the hidden, secret corners of my own area and tie them into my investigations into local history etc... and it led to my very conscious decision, cutting the engine of the mower outside the premises of the Carshalton Steam Laundry where I was mowing the grass on a hot July day, and having the thought very clearly in my head, I WANT TO BE A POET, THIS IS WHAT I WANT TO DO WITH MY LIFE.

'The Carshalton Poems' was my first major experiment in composition by field, and must have taken me about 2½ years to write. I already had most of it written when Val and I ran away to Jersey in 1967, and it was while we were in Jersey that Andrew Crozier wrote and offered to do a Ferry Press book for me, my first collection. He sent back the first version of the whole book that I sent him, offering further suggestions; and I finally sent him the completed book, with a few additional poems, from Bristol in early 1968. There are 2 or 3 poems at the end of GREEN ORANGE PURPLE RED which are "Bristol poems" - 'Collage', 'Gouache', and of course 'Brandon Hill'. There's a further version of 'The Carshalton Poems' lying around somewhere, written after the death of one of the ORIGINS mob who married Bill Wyatt's sister Ann, a fellow called Barry Taylor. It's never been published, and no doubt it's lying around under a pile of dusty documents somewhere.

PH: While you were in Bristol your second book came out - ARIES UNDER SATURN AND BEYOND. This seems to me to be a somewhat transitional book.

CT: Certainly of all my books and pamphlets ARIES is the one I have least affection for. There's a lot of loose note-taking in it which could now be replaced by much more conscious compositions such as 'The Rainbringer' poem - which has now been published in the pamphlet THE RAINBRINGER - and a thing which I tentatively call 'The Madman on Durdham Downs', which is a prose outtake with a nice ending to it, which was part of a series called 'Bristol Portraits' which appeared in EUREKA. Really my Bristol poems have come out in several different outlets and it would be nice now to do a selective reissue of all the Bristol poems. Why it was weak was I think because Andrew was fairly keen to get a second book out and I, too, taking up the opportunity offered, rather rushed the job, and we certainly didn't get as much intensity or density into it as we seemed to get into the first book - we were too keen to keep the thing moving perhaps, so that's the key to the weakness there.

PH: In his review of ACROSPIRICAL MEANDERINGS IN A TONGUE OF THE TIME, in POETRY INFORMATION 14, Iain Sinclair says that you have never been over concerned with structure but he sees that THE MAGIC DOOR is beginning to be different: you are starting to have the self confidence to write a cycle; to write in a sequential way and to advertise the fact. Would this be a fair comment?

CT: Yes, I'd say that was a fair comment. At the beginning of THE MAGIC DOOR, having done ACROSPIRICAL MEANDERINGS... and having had that warm and positive response from Barry MacSweeney (in POETRY INFORMATION 9/10) and others, I really consciously felt now that I had to start a whole new tide, not just a linked collection of short poems, linked but surviving in themselves as single isolated poems - this time to do something that would really call upon the resources of my unconscious. It would hopefully really pull things out of me and out of the landscape and out of the life I was living. That sounds rather grandiose, indeed it is grandiose, but I suppose it's something I've tried to inherit from the American influence: "Think Big". Maybe it looks a bit untidy and disordered, but I'm certainly more satisfactorily engaged in this than churning out a series of short single act poems.

PH: Hence "this Celtic Arthurian ley-line Gothic obsession", you write of in the 'Mirages' section of MAGIC DOOR BOOK 2, which on the one hand you embrace and on the other you distrust.

CT: Yes. This comes from the deliberate sinking into the unconscious propelled by Jung's psychology and alchemy.

PH: Are alchemical terms used symbolically to chart your spiritual progress?

CT: You might say that. You might say they're revealing the state of the spirit to me as I go on through them. Whether there can be any progress is so debatable I wouldn't try to answer it. My vision or my plot for the whole project is that it should be about transformation in man and in nature. Well, just to take it a slightly different avenue - every cell in your body is supposed to change every seven years so I can argue that in seven years time I will be a completely different man to the one I am now, and indeed I now differ from the consciousness I was in 1970, which in fact is the first year I came here. So it's cyclical; it's not necessarily progressive. One can still end up in the same black hole, just as some of the imagery in the 'Nigredo' poems in MAGIC DOOR BOOK ONE is a bit horrific. One can and does continue, it seems, to travel back to those spots, or to spots that are very like them, so it isn't as if I feel I'm aiming for enlightenment as in, say, Zen. I'm not looking for a religious solution or a philosophical solution. I can't argue a philosophical solution against the actual state of affairs revealed by the times - by gathering information from the media there seems to be no possibility of an answer in those terms any longer. All I can do is replay my data and the data which to me are most important, most honed down; the data I feel to be most relevant to my situation here in relative isolation, but not so far away from the pollution that I can't see it, hear it, smell it, and touch it, even from a remote stone cottage.

PH: Perhaps we could talk about the "ley line obsession", as you put it.

CT: In looking at ley lines I've discovered I'm looking at a decayed system, but one with still some latent energy in it, which could be tapped, which I perhaps try to tap, but which is perhaps also perverted in some ways, blackened by the way the ley system has been sapped by man's subsequent fairly ignorant misuse of the system - misuse subsequent to it being laid down by some posited race of philosophers and mathematicians, druids if you like, necromancers, masons, wizards, ancient stone geniuses of old. Who these people are is just one of the lines of investigation I've been finding myself following as I've traced this obsession with the standing stones, through to the people who put them up, and why they were put there, and what the machinery was.

PH: This seems much more evident from the second book of THE MAGIC DOOR, in which you appear to be using prose as well as poetry in order to present information to the reader, rather than, as you said, writing nature poems. Does the prose work purely on an informational level, or is there any other reason for including it?

CT: It works quite well on the purely informational level, but I like to think of it descending down into the pool, the pool of knowledge accumulated by the imagination

in its quest for whatever is being quested for; so I hope that it resounds, that the layers of information make harmonies with the other types of information that are coming in from time to time in solid blocks....

I'm very interested to see the way Allen Fisher and Iain Sinclair have treated the subject of lines of force, lines of power, ley lines. I'm sure it becomes an exercise in consciousness and descending into unconsciousness. The fact that the ancients knew about this precession of the equinoxes, this 26 thousand year cycle, all goes to show how so long ago man's mind was just as vast as it is today, or seems to be, in its willing aperception, its willingness to try and make an idealistic model of the creativity implied in the universe. That's what I feel I'm getting at now, but it's so difficult to put that down. I used to read a lot of philosophy when I was in my teens and twenties, but then I dropped it. I did German philosophy, existentialism, I looked at Zen. That was my frame of mind, and I liked philosophical novels. Now I feel I'm involved in speculation, in trying to place myself in space and time, and trying to place us beyond the immediate concerns of 1977. The ley lines are helping and hindering: they're sometimes shining with a white light and telling me to go on, and they're sometimes corrupt and discharging foul and noxious forces. Sinclair again here very relevant with LUD HEAT, and Allen Fisher with his migraine headaches, and trudging through London streets looking up bits of information about South-East London - counting the busfares and the time it takes to get to the library to look up a fact. That's very, very live to me. It may seem like putting the banal with the speculatively ridiculous, but this is one thing I do believe: that there is spirit all over this land in all of us; we can never deny it, but rationalist and materialist thinking have blotted out a lot of it. But we can still come back to that consciousness, perhaps not in the way a paleolithic hunter could do his cave paintings in the interiors of fantastically inaccessible caves, but we can still have flashes of the vision. One of my heroes during the '60s was William Burroughs, but I ended up with this criticism of Burroughs: that he didn't seem to have any hope for the future - I still persist in having a hope for the future, whereas I don't think Burroughs has that.

PH: Regarding poetics - would you like to comment on the prose passage in MAGIC DOOR BOOK ONE, in which you compare David Jones and Pound. It's been found intrusive in a quote in Sinclair's review in PI. I'd like you to comment on the placing of the piece, and also how you feel now about the relative merits of Jones and Pound.

CT: I feel that Peter Riley, who I think can be fairly revealed to be the objector here, was quite right to pick me up on that point, and yet at the same time I'm not particularly apologetic about allowing that into THE MAGIC DOOR. I find, flicking through my own notebooks, that I've said some really cryptic things about people who are crucial in my life - other poets that I feel close to, or whom I'm grappling with at the time. Sometimes there's tremendous rejection there, and I definitely went through this phase of wanting to throw down Pound and rest in this homely intimacy with David Jones and his explanatory notes. I think differently now. I've had some tremendous experiences with the CANTOS since then, and if you ask me now about what I think about that comment, I'd say yes it's wrong, but the excuse is that it's true evidence of a state of mind. Not that I'd bung down any old bosh - that's very tempting, but one tries to avoid that - but it survived, it slipped into print, and there it is.

PH: In general, your poems are direct and simple, although there is a certain grandiose way in which you use words to describe simple occurrences or events, such as the title ACROSPHERICAL MEANDERINGS IN A TONGUE OF THE TIME... and in one of your poems in that book your cat emerges as 'Sweetheart of Sigmund Freud'. Perhaps you'd like to talk about your use of language.

CT: Yes, these are often serendipitous intercalations (PH: Ha ha!) that creep in. They very often flow out at the end of a stream-of-consciousness entry in the journal. Perhaps they're a bit unfair in that they rely partly on secret information - for instance, 'Sweetheart of Sigmund Freud' is the title of a jazz number which may have been written by... a dance band piece of the late '50s possibly played by Shorty

Rogers and his Giants, but also it's a thing that in another sense Lee Harwood has remarked on: that of the Latinate influence, and of the ponderous perhaps. I think it's fair to say this, and then go on to remark that a lot of my early reading was of people such as Mervyn Peake and Lawrence Durrell, and others - heavy prose generally, which must have left its trace on my consciousness, despite the subsequent overlays of slicker, more honed transatlantic influences; also influences from various places which have led me to try to get things right down to the concise. But I can't stay with that process for very long - I can start to go through the process of honing my poems down to the tight and precise when I find, because of my nature, that I get constipated and can't write at all, so no matter how I envy the beautifully spare look - the appearance, say, of a Creeley page of lines, or a page containing 2 or 3 of Harwood's blocks of poetry, I can't stay that disciplined for long. I have to get back to spontaneous expression, I have to be tapping that which lies just below the surface, that which is a bit of a jumble of all sorts, of sayings mixed up from all the thousands of books I've read - I read books to feed that machine, that battery of words and phrases and images. I've never been that precise in my discipline in the same way that, say, an academic poet might be precise about how to classify his general orders of knowledge, and classify his choice of verbs and adjectives. I've always found, certainly in my draft poems, that I am inclined to overdo the double epithet, which is something that Coleridge talks about - it's very tempting to go on writing just for the sake of description; writing description is the easiest thing to do, it's the easiest hook to hang on, it's much more difficult to have action riding through the poem, transferring it from one place to another, of having a real cycle within a page like that.

PH: How do you react to the concept of "place" as postulated by Jeremy Hilton in his introduction to the special place issue of JOE DIMAGGIO, to which you contributed, and do you line yourself up with the poets included in that issue?

CT: Yes, I would line up with them quite happily, I think, but on the other hand I wouldn't want to peddle any doctrinaire line either. As far as I'm concerned it's one of the most valuable things that's there to be used - which is that of identity of the self with place - and I started right away doing that in the 'Carshalton poems'. I could never write in the abstract, apart from THE RAINBRINGER; I could never invent a scenario. It always had to be manufactured out of my feeling for the texture of a place.

PH: What particular "place" poets would you associate yourself with most closely?

CT: The concept of place probably first came to me whilst I was reading William Carlos Williams' PATERSON. So, in the 1970s I'm looking around at the English poets and seeing suddenly a dozen or so who are also picking up on this strand. It seems to me as though we've all arrived at similar positions fairly spontaneously. It hasn't been spread as a doctrine, it's been picked up willingly, and it also helps us to get out of that too modernistic present day abstraction of so much so called "modern" poetry, which seems to concern itself only with man's fate on the present plane. There seem to be a lot of poems written about dingy little predicaments and fatalities and suicides. There seems to be a readiness to accept the doomsday tide, but I think the "place" poets are very often concerned with tracking time, man time or perhaps even time alone back to some source.

PH: It seems to me that many of your poems rely to a great extent on an intimate tone of voice for their effect. For example you dedicate a lot of poems to friends; you seem to be speaking directly to them, and also in your style of reading you draw the listener into your own "world". Could you talk about this... it's a difficult area...

CT: It's a difficult area because it's a sensitive area, and I've had to explore quite thoroughly the ramifications of writing personally in separating out the genuine poetic content from the willing gift to the person, to the dedicatee, without getting too over-propositional about it... too intimately into things that don't matter. To put it another way, with regard to Lee Harwood - in writing many of my early poems

I was consciously imitating him, residing in his image as it were; and I think with many persons it's been the same process again, in that someone has come into my life who has a specific influence or reaction on me - they've pushed me into further creative areas; I've been linked intimately with them in friendship, and therefore many of the poems are letters to their recipients. So many of the poems are written as love poems. There is a lot of my poetry, I think, which isn't dedicated in which I could probably trace various people. It really is difficult to explain this - making a model in the image of another - I can't do any better than that.

PH: In his short "enthusiasm" of ACROSPIRICAL MEANDERINGS... in POETRY INFORMATION 9/10, Barry MacSweeney says that you have the "original gift of spreading the atmosphere of the ideal world over familiar forms and incidents". Do you have an ideal world in an Arcadian sort of sense?

CT: I don't think I can quite reach to that. I very often find myself discussing this kind of thought with people who call themselves revolutionaries, or who want things changed, at any rate. I do have dreams where perhaps I go further out of society. I don't know - I rely on society for my input; after all, I rely on society for my language. I'm interested in the development of modern language, therefore I feel that perhaps I wouldn't be able to make this move right out into the wilderness, right out into self-sufficiency, plus loneliness and isolation. To me the most fructue periods are associated with specific events involving specific people. I may have been doing the solid researching, the painstaking note-taking for weeks or perhaps even months, without writing a single line of poetry, but a couple of visitors can set up a whole stream, a whole development, they can be triggers. To go further out would perhaps... I don't know, I don't know whether one could reach a point of vacuum in the spirit where it would all turn round and come back again as some kind of solid, pure, meditative philosophical poetry that decants itself in passive isolation in some supposed mature age of my present life. But, at the moment I don't see how I can do without this essential contact with the outside world. Once again it's through people... I hope to learn about people and learn to love them better, and I put that through the test, through the medium of poetry. I put their inspiration through the medium of my poem addressed to them.

PH: Finally, there are several references to drugs in your writing. Can you talk about what influence drugs have had on your writing?

CT: One evening in the summer of 1965, I smoked some dope and went for a walk across the park. I remember wading very slowly through a field of ox-eye daisies, and being fascinated by the intersurface they made between me and the ground with their gently swaying heads at about kneecap level. It was just at the point where the dusk makes certain things glow, and the ghostly white flowers were as precious as stars. I sat down in the pub and wrote some lines, a poem to Thelonus Monk. Each line poured out like molten metal into a die, the poem flowing into solid form under my pen "just like it had already been written there". When the poem had finished arriving, I couldn't change a word. It was pure dictation. It was also my first conscious interception of it. Cannabis could certainly be used to tap the stream of consciousness, and somehow to cut out the extraneous chatter when one wanted to work, to get the day's material down. And it could be used again as I went over and over the blocks of material until I was happy with them. I could more clearly discern which bits of the material excited me, which had more rhythmic suggestions to the next piece. I'd read aloud a lot in my attic room, trying out lines and successions of lines, locating the internal harmonies, the linguistic gristle. I don't think many other poets work quite like this, though I know plenty of poets who smoke dope. I use dope as an ally; as theraputic release; it slows down and appears to deepen my experience of other poets' work; and it's a relaxing social habit, part of the information exchange, "just one of nature's little bonuses" as a friend put it to me once. I'm not convinced it's foolproof, though - I think there can be a dependence, though not as sharp as tobacco. But it seems to be a legitimate tool for me to use. It's a pain in the arse and a social evil that it's illegal, and I'm for legalisation as soon as possible. At one time I found use of LSD

was powerfully influencing my poetry, but that isn't the case now. I find alcohol absolutely contraindicated for writing, except on the one specific occasion when I was influenced by a particularly incandescent experience with Mr Brain's heady Cardiff brew, and I wrote a quite reasonable poem on that, 'Carnival', which was published in POETRY WALES.

CHRIS TORRANCE: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books & pamphlets

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