

John Cornall twists and turns through a poetic maze

## Mutated Muse

Andrew Lawson's **Human Capital** (*Boldface Press*) and Andrew Duncan's **Cut Memories And False Commands** (*Reality Studios*, £6.95) are uncompromising books by two leading young poets from the avant garde of British poetry.

*Human Capital* illustrates the way, as culture progresses, that materialist-based values are eroded and counterfeited ones set in their place. These false values, like the multifarious consumables of late-capitalist culture, titillate and exhaust human resource.

The first poem begins: 'The dusk-inked trees are etched/filled with noise and shadowed bodies.' The etched and filled trees, ambiguously neither natural or artificial, can be connected to later references to enervated sensory experience: images of eyes emptied and filled or veins charged with the acid torpor of lethargy.

These lines do not refer to

things-as-seen, but to a conceptual image, not unlike the intellectual metaphor of 17th century 'metaphysical' poetry. He forces the reader to make connections and to find precise contexts or conceptual frameworks for each line or phrase: 'From cool seclusion you emerge,/flushed with meaning like/the trained and arching ash.'

*Human Capital's* intransigent, artful address can be seen as a refusal to titillate, or otherwise cheaply excite its reader. Lawson seeks instead to engage the reader in the process of constructing meaning. The obtuseness and difficulty of Andrew Duncan's open-ended sequence of poems is found in its wide range of reference though there is also thematic complexity and discontinuity of expression. His poetry is furious and bardic but it nevertheless does not rest secure, as the book's title hints, with the imperatives

of sentiment as a valid ground for truth-saying: 'Days, worked out in city walls/light, shining out of other people/corrupt the memory /How can I say anything to you?' ('A Flock Of Deer By Moonlight').

Like Allen Ginsberg, Duncan acknowledges the body as the final reference and creative motor of the poetry but, like Wyndham Lewis, and indeed like Lawson, he also regards the body as a *machina carnis*, a debased organism hooked to a diet of cheap sensation.

One of the hopes of poetry has been that it could deliver a renewed sense of commonality and human order in the face of nature, but in the visions of these two books there seems little chance. The human condition appears mutated rather than merely estranged. What affirmative stance both poets do offer is a kind of freedom gained by means of a vigorous, critical, intellectually lively detachment from the common life.

Also polemically pitted

against contemporary living, but more traditionally hopeful in its prospect, is Peter Riley's **Sea Watches** (*Prest Roots Press*, pbk £7.50), eight sets of eight, six-line stanzas, set in North Wales, on the Lleyn Peninsula, near the once famous site of pilgrimage, Bardsey Island.

*Sea Watches* is concerned with repetition and order in a deep sense. The poet visited the Lleyn Peninsula for one week, each year, between 1978 and 1989, staying at the same caravan site. In the seaside chapel at Llangwnnadr, 'Where travellers rest. I sit in silence/Doing and thinking nothing for as long/As I can bear it.'

Throughout the book the poet contemplates the giving up of one centre, the centre of the ego or of the self in society, and the finding of another centre or refuge, by drifting into harmony with the millennial repetitiveness of place. This poetry might be called meditative localism, which is different from provincialism because it imagines its own centre.\*