



ENTREVISTA

A CONVERSATION WITH
JAMES FENTON

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— Mr. Fenton, just to start with, would you mind giving me a biographical outline of yourself including those aspects that you consider important in the formation of your poetry?

— Well, that's going to be a very big question. I was born in 1949. I started writing poetry while I was at Oxford and finally became a fiction reviewer while still a student. After a few years working on literature I left literary journalism in order to start working on my own creative production. Then I became an assistant literary editor for *The New Statesman*. In 1973 I got the Henry Gregory Award for my first book of poems, that allowed me to go journeying to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. I lived the fall of Saigon and after a few months I returned to my work in *The New Statesman* as a political correspondent. Then I travelled to Germany and stayed in Berlin as the foreign correspondent for *The Guardian*. When I returned, I started working as a drama critic for *The Sunday Times*.

— It is rather unusual for a poet of your age to have a book published in a commercial, popular edition in Penguin, without mentioning your inclusion in their new *Anthology of English Contemporary Verse*. What do you think is responsible for your rapid success as a poet?

— It is not a rapid success... the poems in the Penguin edition come from fifteen years of work. I suppose you can say that in my first years of writing I had a quick (...) and modest success. My first book was published, far too soon probably, in 1972. Then I stopped writing for a very long time and only in the last three years I've been writing again regularly. I think during this time there had been a general change of attitude to poetry: more interesting writing is going on, in general, and more poets are meeting their audience. My book *The Memory of War* was a success in its hardback edition and I got the Southern Arts Literary Award

for poetry in 1981, then we thought we could approach Penguin just to see if a genuine publishing house might take it. The general change I have just mentioned and the good reviews made them think about the possibility of its publication.

— **I would like to know what's your own perspective on these two aspects of your life. On the one hand the detached, objective insights of the journalist, and on the other, the poetic ability for turning those insights into words and rhythms. How do you experience these two realities in your creative process?**

— You cannot put pressure on your poetry to make a living out of it. If you have an experience which is particularly significant to you I don't think you can make poetry out of it immediately. Let's take a fictitious example. The poet comes home one day and finds that his family has been murdered. That would be an experience. If a few days later he tries to write something about it I think the job of the poet becomes something disgusting. Most of my stuff about Vietnam was written very recently. I couldn't go out in the fields where people were being murdered, come back home and then write a poem. I couldn't do that, neither do I think it desirable.

— **Let's carry on, if you don't mind, with the influence of your former occupation in your poetry. After working for several years in a left-wing magazine one can assume a certain ideological attitude in your political writings. Is the ideological perspective you accepted when writing in *New Statesman* continued to some extent in your poetry?**

— There's a big tension between the demands on your political life and the demands on your artistic life. One has to keep detached. The position of the young revolutionary poet who says, «Hey chaps, use my poetry for the revolution: set it to work», is a way to ensure that you write bad poetry and, I think, it's not, as a matter of fact, of any particular use for the revolution either. Even when I was a militant trotskyst I was quite certain that I would not try to put my poetry at the service of revolution. On the other hand, political positions condition what you think you should be writing. It was only when I managed to throw off the constrained feelings of political involvement that I could write freely.

— **Would you define yourself as a left-wing writer? (if that means anything to you)**

— It's very easy to have a bad left-wing writer. If the poet works for the party's cultural committee, as it were, that is terrible. This is in fact the great argument for any Marxist intellectual since the thirties. At that time many centered on the opposed views of Brecht and Lukács, that is «what was the international way to write; should it be within the realist tradition of the new bourgeois realism?». The artists of my generation were very much influenced by Brecht's aesthetic writings, and influenced very much for the bad I think. There was a whole group of people, particularly into the theatre, saying «theater must be explicitly political». I think that makes bad theater and bad politics. Even when I had a very practical

commitment writing political articles, I always thought that writing poetry was my own business, not the business of the party or even revolution.

— **As a political writer or, better, as a writer on politics, you have taken part in some of the most famous controversies in the crisis of the left in this country. That crisis still goes on and some of the cornerstones of the left «intelligentzia» are still telling, by different means, their own view of this crisis —I am thinking now of David Edgard's *Maydays*. Is your poetry, if not in a direct sense, you personal reflection on that crisis?**

— I've never written agit-pro poetry. On the other hand my book is obviously a very political one because it reflects the major political event of the decade. Probably «Prison Island» is perhaps the only intended reflection on revolution. The poem presents defeat as an actual possibility for any revolutionary movement.

— **Talking about ideological attitudes in your poetry, it has been said it moves from «constructive disillusion» to a «tame hope». Are these the landmarks for your political attitude these days?**

— Obviously, disillusion plays a part in me. If you ignore what happens in the world you can remain faithful to your own ideological views. This was very clear in Vietnam. One has to face up not simply his or her individual role but the role of the movement you have been a part of. You can say that the idea of «reform» is a «tame hope» in comparison with the idea of revolution, but I think one has to be honest these days.

— **Auden said that a poet could write a poem about Charles II, hardly about Winston Churchill. In a sense, this matches the choice of «exotical» locations for your poetry. You normally deal with situations far from local or European history. Why is this?**

— I am not systematic on this. There are many subjects I would like to write a poem about, but between the desire and the ability of writing a poem lies the strainer of art and self-criticism.

— **Auden in «The Poet and the City» says: «Poets are by the nature of their interests and the nature of their artistic fabrication, singularly ill-equipped to understand politics or economics». This doesn't seem to be your case. How would you redefine the relationship between poetry and politics?**

— Auden himself changed. He had initially a rather frivolous interest in politics and he posed as a communist; then, afterwards, he spent a long time trying to come to terms with his own past and his new conception of political reality. This quotation come from the second period of his life. In my case, I went further with political commitment than Auden ever did.

— **How do you see the role of the poet now in the 800's?**

— It's something you can't predic about. You cannot legislate for poetry.

^— In the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, we can read: «These poets are not inhabitants of their own lives so much as intrigued observers, not victims but onlookers, not poets working in a confessional white heat but dramatists and story tellers». How would you explain this shift in the interests of English Poets?

— That introduction was written by people with different interests. One of them is very interested in the «Martian school» type of poetry, involved in direct perception of the everyday world. According to that introduction I belong to a different tradition, one with a great interest in story-telling and fiction. I do not agree with that. It would be nice to write a great narrative but equally nice to write a great elegy. I think that this introduction is not so much a description as a prescription of how poetry should go, in front of Alvarez's interest in the extremes of human experience —madness, suicide, breakdown and neurotic revelations—. I disliked it because I thought it was another form of prescription. Since then the reputation of some of the poets included in the Alvarez anthology has changed tremendously. I still think that Sylvia Plath, for instance, is a very good poet but, honestly, I wouldn't like to follow her. The reaction against all that provoked in a sense what the new Penguin anthology is trying to pick up and reflect.

— Up to what point would you say that definition suits yourself?

— Well, I don't know up to what extent my poetry protests or rebels against anything (...) There's a good story (...) a group of students addresses its teacher in an Arts class: «we think that any art must contain an element of protest». The teacher, turning back to a slide of a Cezanne still life says: «I agree with that». «But —say the students— what is the protest in that?». «Well —says the teacher— it is a protest against sloppy things». I think that's my own creed.

— Do you see yourself as representing a particular tendency or grouped with any other writers?

— I have something to do with several poets. One of the things that divided people with literary interests when I started writing was the attitude to Auden. I admired Auden deeply. John Fuller, my first tutor at Oxford, also influenced me, also within the Auden tradition. Apart from him, people like Craig or Graham are good friends of mine but I don't know up to what extent they influence my own poetry.

— Which do you think are the basic concerns of Contemporary British poetry? (if this generalization is possible)

— One of the great concerns, to start with, in contemporary British poetry is Ireland. Seamus Heaney, one of the great names at the moment, has refused his «British» identification but like it or not stands in the milieu of everybody writing poetry in England. So I often think about Ireland being one of the great themes of British poetry. I can't contribute much to it as I don't have Irish ancestors that I can talk about in a constructive way.

You also find English poetry regularly looking at nature, so there is a kind of «pastoral» genre. I must say that's something I revolt against.

— Why?

— One of the things I found when reading about Nature was that people were saying a lot of lies about it. My own experience as a child was a continuous disappointment with nature. I grew up in the industrial area near Sheffield and Rotherham. Trees were thick with dirt; the streams were polluted, I knew from books one should find fish in the streams but I never found one. My only genuine poetic response to that would be to write about a polluted countryside... and maybe one day I will, but that isn't the same as the pastoral poetry of the beautiful Oxford landscape, the Edward Thomas or Thomas Hardy type of poetry.

— **John Bayley's review of your book in *TLS* has as headline «The Verse of Accomplishment». In your case, accomplishment seems to run in parallel with an emotional detachment. Why?**

— I am not emotionally detached. I do try to express emotions satisfactorily (...) sometimes, particularly in my poems about Cambodia, I aim to convey the continuous consequences of the Cambodian war as it affects the mind of somebody who's actually left the country but who has left friends there. If it doesn't come over emotionally that means that the poem has failed (...) it's amazing how critics can overlook the personal aspects of my poetry. Certain reviewers seem to expect as they open a book that the book itself should burst into tears, splash out in your face. That obviously is not my technique to convey feeling in poetry.

— **Going on with this question, your poetry creates its own world, an alien world to real life but, at the same time, the material you handle is very close to everyday —tragic— life. What sort of process do you follow for the creation of that special world of your own?**

— What you expect is that the poetry you write has a quality which is like handwriting; that it is authentically yours. In the same way one learns how to write at school and then it develops into your forensically recognizable script. You hope the same thing will happen to your poetry whatever kind of theme you deal with.

— **John Bayley's review said something about Auden that he obviously thought extended to you: «They used a self or an epoch to create something quite different, more vivid, visible and fuller of meaning than life, or any life can be, but bringing us back to living with the sharper, educated eye that comes from participation in art». Up to what point does your poetry stand in this kind of relationship with reality?**

— I don't know really. Sometimes I feel I have failed to communicate some very simple things I thought there were in my poems.

When you publish a poem you get an enormous amount of feed-back. The one from reviewers is normally quite unsatisfactory. They try to be very interested in

the influences and in the technical questions. Actually, they are quite good, too good, detecting influences. They do that or just look at it in a very «aesthetic» way. If one of them came into a room with a corpse lying on the floor, he would be able to detect the influence of Agatha Christie but he wouldn't notice that a crime had been committed. That attitude is very typical of a certain type of criticism and also there is some kind of poetry produced to be read exclusively by these critics.

If you could write the type of poetry which fascinated people more for its subject matter than for its technique or influence, that would be a wonderful poetry to have. If there would be a campaign in poetry, it should be a campaign for the primacy of subject matter. This kind of poetry could not have a subject matter reading something like, «The inability of art to express reality»...

The poem could be about the Lisbon earthquake (...) as it were. Something really making people think about what you are telling them in the poem. That probably would exclude the critic. They should give up their jobs, become readers.

— The general tendency in poetry after the fifties —at least in Spain— points towards subjective poetry, but in your poems we can talk of a social concern as a constant element. Is that the role you assume as a poet?

— You could say that incidentally my interest in subject matter shows a social concern. It would be wonderful to have a poetry which we could call «popular» because people would want to read it in order to be more informed about life. This obviously is critical heresy. Critics claim the better poet you are the more involved people will feel in your poetical technique and so, removed from the «external» subject matter. This is ridiculous. It implies that in order to talk to people about something you must be a bad poet.

— If someone reads your poems he may feel that the two great themes in English poetry -Love and Nature- are missing. Are you consciously renouncing these two themes? Does that mean that you are an urban poet?

— I wouldn't say so, but I am not a nature poet either. I am quite optimistic as a poet in choosing the theme of my poems. The problem of love poetry is to distinguish one poem from another. One of my first jobs was to go through the unsolicited contributions to the poetry section in *The New Statesman*; after reading huge piles of poems the only thing I could get was the «I-said-this-you-said-that-You-looked-at-me-I-looked-at-You-I-threw-out-of-the-window» poem. Probably I wouldn't write a love poem unless I —at least— could distinguish it from others.

— Sometimes the basic pattern of your poetical language is very close to that of journalistic prose: Short, descriptive clauses, adapting the structure of the sentence to that of the line, usage of headlines which expand as the poem advances: «Every fear is a desire...» or «What I am is not important, whether I live or die». Is this just my own impression or a conscious, purposeful use of the journalistic register?

— Well, if you can make a simple statement which is true and it hasn't been said before, that is a wonderful thing to do, although I am not sure that is

journalistic. When I started writing I felt that there was a lot more in the developed language of prose that had poetic possibilities that people had thought about. That was a poetic starting point. For instance, in scientific language. In this sense, Auden made an important contribution to English poetical tradition, with a number of suggestions about the types of themes which could be the subject matter for poetry. The non-literary use of language is a very good place to mine. Using sentences as found objects.

— Auden, in «The Virgin and the Dynamo» says that every poet, consciously or unconsciously, holds three absolute presuppositions as the dogmas of his art: a) A historical world exists, a world of unique events, related by analogy, not identity; b) The historical World is a fallen world; c) The historical world is a redeemable world through poetry. These three actions, I think, pervade in a sense some of your war poems, especially in «Children in Exile» when you write:

«And save Cambodia from threatened extinction.
Let not its history be made its fault.»

Don't you think that these three principles may lead easily to some sort of dangerous didacticism?

— Well, it expresses a wish that Cambodia should escape from what seems to be historical and geographical predeterminism. It's really a wish and I have to say I wouldn't want to become a didactic poet... unless I could teach people something really useful in a poem... aerobics, for instance.

— «Auden started out as an amoral anarchist and around the age of thirty adopted chastening public orthodoxy». This is a quotation from Mendelson's edition of Auden's *Selected Poetry*. Do you think that the tone and attitude in a poem like «Children in Exile» may be read as some sort of «chastening public orthodoxy»?

— Well «chastening» is not the word. A poem like «Children in Exile» tries to express feelings people have not thought worth while expressing in a poem and I personally think are worth saying. One of the things it says is that charity is a good thing... That is not an orthodox point, unless you view it from the revolutionary perspective which says that the world does not save through charity but through revolution...

— Or justice?

— Well, the terrible justice of revolution. The poem talks about individuals answering the demands of the crying needs of other individuals. Although people wouldn't disagree with charity openly, they wouldn't express it in a poem either. I thought it would be interesting a direct vindication of it.

— The use of narrative discourse is another important element in your poetic diction. Do you use narrative as a way to fulfil an interest in «tales»

in the reading public, or is it a need derived from the sort of poetic material you handle?

— I certainly think that there is no reason why we shouldn't take back the right to tell a story through poetry. Nevertheless I think if we want poetry to recover its old position, say as in Victorian times, the point is not simply to write narratives but to write comprehensive, interesting poetry. That's again critical heresy. I've made use of the ballad and musical tradition in some of my poems... «The Skip», for instance.

— The idea of «social poetry» is normally applied to your «war poetry». Let's turn to that point if you don't mind. Where would you place yourself within this subgenre, particularly, among those dealing with the Vietnam war?

— I try not to think of myself as a war poet. A war poet is the kind of poet like Sassoon or Owen who goes to fight a war and write poetry about it. Rather than that, in my case I was a journalist, writing about war. It's the difference between the soldier and the reporter even though they may be side by side at combat. The reporter is not obliged to kill people and this is the central experience at war. I cannot arrogate myself the title of a war poet... I've just been reading **Required Writings** by Philip Larkin and in it he talks about Owen. I agree with his definition of the war-poet as someone involved in the experience of killing, but Larkin surprisingly states the idea that Owen's poetry is somehow not quite top-notch because he is reacting rather than choosing the subject matter of his poetry. This is really strange, unless it comes out of an avowed envy of Owen's experience.

— T.S. Eliot ends his poem «A Note on war poetry»:

«War is not a life: it is a situation,
 One which may neither be ignored nor accepted,
 A problem to be met with ambush and stratagem,
 Enveloped or scattered.
 The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,
 Of private experience at its greater intensity
 Becoming universal, which we call «poetry»,
 May be affirmed in verse.»

Would you say that these lines describe your own attitude towards war as a poetic theme?

— This is a very peculiar thing altogether. The reason why it took me so long to write about the war was precisely I didn't want to turn my experience glibly into poetry. Owen and Sassoon did not have that fear as what they were urgently trying to do was to draw attention to the reality of war in order to stop it. I think that one has to bear in mind when reading poets like Larkin, Eliot and indeed Auden for that matter, the great importance of being a non-combatant. The question of choice related to the war experience sounds to me as if it comes from a personality who being a non-combatant has never come to terms with it.

To me the concept of war poet refers to the poet expressing the experience of being a soldier; somebody who writes about a war that he or she has visited is more the result of what Auden called «the public or historical voice of the poet».

— **Curiously, the most classical piece in the Penguin edition is also the only love poem in the book. What moved you to use this classical frame for your only love poem?**

— Among the kind of poetry people write now there are not many love poems. There are lots of dedications and poems about life in couple or family life but very few like the ones Elizabethan poets wrote, addressed simply to love.

Probably that's why «Nothing» may sound «classical». One could speculate here why love poetry is not so much written. If you write with a critical audience in mind and you are handling your poems to the academic minority, the last thing you want to do is to write a love poem because the sort of emotions you are dealing with would dry up in the hands of this audience. That may be another example of the deleterious effect of academic criticism upon poetry as an art.

I think it's strange that a professional drama critic attacks criticism, but probably I'm playing Tiresias now.

— **J. Gil de Biedma, a well-known Spanish poet, in a poem called «Auden's at last the secret is out», tries to hint at the idea of the poet as an «outsider» one way or another, when he says:**

«Beyond the clear voice
hidden beyond the walls of the monastery,
Beyond the movie poster,
Beyond the smell of bushes,
Beyond the card game,
The cough, the hands, the kiss
There is always a private me,
there is always a perverse secret.»

Do you see your poetry as a result of that «private me» or «perverse secret», or more as an expression of a «public voice» claiming the public interest?

— That's certainly a very good poem. And it is quite true of Auden. When he became a public figure he constricted himself to that image and he fought desperately to preserve his privacy. In my case, there's not such a problem but obviously the ultimate source of poetry is always your privacy, perverse or not.