

Alexander Hutchison in email conversation with **Andrew Duncan**
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AD: What got you going, what were the things you remember early on associated with poetry?

AH: As to early enthusiasms – if you could call it that – I delivered ‘Gunga Din’ at the age of six or so to the local church Sunday School Christmas party. I felt I was being condescended to slightly by the elder or School supervisor as he led me forward, me probably in short trousers with straps as braces crossing at the front. “Oh, and he’s going to do a po-em.” I recall looking up, holding his hand, as he (perfectly friendly) looked down. Then I set off at a trot *a capella*:

You may talk o’ gin and beer ...

And on for fifty or so lines to:

I shan’t forgit the night
When I dropped be’ind the fight
With a bullet where my belt-plate should ‘a’ been.
I was chokin’ mad with thirst,
An’ the man that spied me first
Was our good old grinnin’, gruntin’ Gunga Din.

Then another couple of dozen lines to:

So I’ll meet ’im later on
At the place where ’e is gone—
Where it’s always double drill and no canteen;
’E’ll be squattin’ on the coals
Givin’ drink to poor damned souls,
An’ I’ll get a swig in hell from Gunga Din
Yes, Din! Din! Din!
You Lazarushian-leather Gunga Din!
Though I’ve belted you and flayed you,
By the livin’ Gawd that made you,
You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din!

That must have been good. Odd that I should relish that relic of Empire and choose to pipe it out on that occasion. I don't remember anything of the reaction in the hall or after. I just remember the start and doing it.

Where had you picked that up?

Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* was one of my grandfather's favourites, and though he died the same year I was born, I obviously hadn't been slow to follow up his taste in verse. I did the same with his copy of FitzGerald's version of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* – getting long slugs of it off by heart.

In my teens, the first poem that struck me as being from the same century, and with something recognizable in it, was Stephen Spender's 'The Express' with its "first powerful, plain manifesto". I must have come across it in an anthology one of my sisters brought back from teacher training college – probably alongside 'The Landscape Near an Aerodrome'. 'The Express' looks a bit of an oddity to me now – but it could have been the blatant introduction of the mechanical that caught my attention.

It was a long time before I encountered Spender in person – round about the time of the Watergate trials in America. I was finishing up graduate work, and he was a writer-in residence at Northwestern. By chance I glanced in one morning to the huge TV viewing room at one of the student residences and saw Spender's snowy head of hair and his lanky frame right in the middle of rows of empty seats – he was the only one there – watching the live telecast of Nixon's downfall.

I passed on some poems for his opinion, including 'Lyke-wake', and when after a decent interval I went along to his office to seek him out, he said (fishing around for the right loose leaf pages), "You're so-and-so, aren't you? I liked these *very* much." I said, "No. I'm Hutchison." Then he, with decided adjustment, plummy voice going, if anything, plummier: "Oh. Well in that case I liked them *very* much *indeed*."

I take it from that you couldn't tell either way?

That's right. He liked the place-names, if I remember. Anyway, that was the only time we talked. When he gave a reading not long after, I found his early stuff was the only material I could relate to. It also appeared the only material *he* could relate to – even forty years on – the milky blue eyes misting over, and the voice vatic, like something from a séance, as he languidly rolled the lines out. I heard recently that he turned against that mode – got fed up doing them eventually – and could round on an audience that requested something early.

The obvious thing to focus on first is the meeting point between rhythm and phrasing – can you talk about your way of thinking on this? And as to style, is the runic serpent band on the cover of Deep-Tap Tree a reference to the laconic quality of Norse poetry – or to west Norse elements in Scottish speech?

What would I say about about rhythm and phrasing? I'll go along with Bunting's insistence that emotion is aroused by the *sound* of words – though not when he adds "and next to nothing to do with their meaning". At an

extreme he would claim poets were only good for arranging syllables – and occasionally I’ll endorse that too. Certainly if you are tone-deaf or cloth-eared in any context you might as well pack it in.

The memorial rune as an emblem on the cover and inside *Deep-Tap Tree* did point to the Norse material as a base for several poems there, including start and close. It also is a sign of interlaced decoration or embellishment – which I can talk about later. It was commissioned by a Viking in memory of his mother – there are two serpents, one large, one small, entwined – and if I remember right he was an admiral for one of the emperors of Byzantium.

In terms of language, the cryptic, reductive, ironical character of the saga-speech and related dialects was around very early I suppose – a typical winter’s evening exchange of pleasantries in my home-town of Buckie, with the boys taikin up or doon the brae, could easily go: “Fit like, man?” – pronounced *min*. And the response: “Aye, it’s a caal hoor o a nicht”.

So laconicism *was* a native element of style. And if that’s the case you have to be sharp to come back, alert to shifts in tone and emphasis. It was a while, though, before I actually read the saga material and the *Hávamál*, for instance, from which the ‘Death of Odinn’ and its epigraph quite obviously derive.

At the same time, in another aspect of the Scottish, northern European tradition there are the extravagant and scabrous exercises you can find in Dunbar, or in Urquhart of Cromarty’s versions of Rabelais: flytings where everything is piled on for outrageous wounding effect. I’ve been pulled into that also, early and late – from ‘Mr Scales Walks His Dog’ to ‘Unfinished Business’. (Though Scales’ dog has Christopher Smart’s cat Jeoffrey as a kissing cousin.)

What sort of approach do you take to pieces like those?

Sauve qui peut. Just set the margins wide to lay it on thick and heavy.

Drawing up catalogues is diverting and pleasurable, but you still have to keep a proper tension, and at least an elemental blocked-out design. Mr Pound, talking about the link between emotion and poetry, said there was an “absolute rhythm” which corresponded precisely to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed, that this was “interpretative” and so in the end ought to be your own, “uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable”.

You need to vary the textures of language; and there’s no reason to suppose that even when a thing rolls on at length and apparently at random it can’t be built up from a pattern of melodic cells or intricate effects. Part of the astonishment in the Tara brooch is the recognition that what you have is worked within as well as without. You can aim for that in lyrics; you can get it in longer or larger forms too.

What about sources? Any contemporaries or near contemporaries that you looked out for in terms of a road to take?

When people start queuing up in the High Street it's tempting to head for the closes and back wynds. You can sometimes predict who you'll bump into; less easy to figure just where you'll come out.

Basil Bunting, W.S. Graham and David Jones were the older poets who drew me in different ways – though they all had depth, humour and resourcefulness. It was a pleasure to me the other day to find that Bunting had a strong regard for David Jones. And it was unexpected: I hadn't heard him mention Jones in conversation, and I didn't remember any particular reference in the printed sources.

All three seemed to have known straightened circumstances, sometimes for very long spells. I'm not recommending that, of course, but it must have contributed in each case to the texture and resilience of their work, and to their character. None of them congenial to certain strands of critical opinion; but all central to me, and in their work real gifts and power.

Behind those three you don't have to go too far for links to Eliot: who was publisher to both Jones and Graham, and acted as a referee for Bunting on at least one famous occasion when Basil applied for a grant and was able to put down Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Ford Madox Ford, I think, but didn't get past the first hurdle because the fellowship people thought he must be taking the piss.

I ended up doing a dissertation on Roethke, and Theodore – loopy, ecstatic, despairing, competitive (he could bust tennis balls by *stamping* on them, and used to cross himself before important points just to rattle opponents who knew he wasn't Catholic) – never made it into Eliot's circle. A particularly *American* barricade was set up for him I suspect. However, the stories I like about Eliot also have a surreal edge. Like when he was desperately unwell, and used to add a bit of green to his complexion to make himself look *iller* (though this deceived none of his friends). Or the time his old college pal Conrad Aitken visited London, and both took on so much alcohol at lunch that when Eliot was ferried back to Faber and Faber by taxi they discovered for some reason he couldn't uncross his legs – and had to be lifted bodily out, over the pavement and up the back stairs to regain his seat in the office.

You went to Canada in the sixties, and lived in Chicago for a while between 1968 and 1970?

That's right, and went back for a bit later. It seemed we were right in the thick of things early on: the Democratic convention riots and trial; Judge Ostler and Mayor Daley; The Fred Hampton shootings. Plus the Art Institute, Solti conducting Mahler; Janice Joplin in a concert wailing out between prolonged biffs from a bottle of Southern Comfort.

What about the poetry?

I fed for a long time on American verse of the middle 20th century. As I say, I wrote a thesis on Roethke, looking at what I called a "context of illumination" in his poems, though I didn't reach a strong, governing idea until about two-thirds of the way through writing it. Which was that his work could be seen to spring from two sources or tendencies. The *immanent*: in the greenhouses,

visions of childhood, the affirmation of earth and all its particulars, with links to a long Romantic line of celebrants – Whitman, Wordsworth, Emerson, Blake (and Palmer, I nearly said – though Samuel Palmer would fit, along with Traherne) plus Hopkins in “morning’s minion” or “long live the weeds” mode; and the *transcendental* – where he went darker, and numinous in a different way with the Metaphysicals, Dickinson, Yeats, Hopkins of the “terrible” sonnets, and on via Evelyn Underhill to the mystics and the archetypes of the *via negativa*, where ultimately the images are wordless – or you have “a darker dark behind the sun” and things like that – not always great territory for poets.

Where do you think that duality came from?

It wasn’t just manic depression – or maybe it was – but the first vein was richer in some ways for him, though he wrote fine love poems and elegies in both. Still, his impulses emotive and spiritual appealed to me, with openings like: “I knew a woman lovely in her bones”. Or in an earlier genre:

Bees and lilies there were
Bees and lilies there were
Either to other
Which would you rather
Bees and lilies were there?

And his long-lined discovery pieces. Whitman you could obviously say was better at it, with those astonishing juxtapositions:

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced
in the beams,
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
I and this mystery, here we stand.

But Roethke had me thirled or hooked on the same wavelength, and was nearer geographically, as it happened, in the Pacific Northwest – though I never met him, and hadn’t even heard of him until I got to Canada in 1966, three years after he had died.

He had worked in Seattle, at the University of Washington – and that was right across Puget Sound from you.

For a period in the 1970s and 80s I lived up near Oyster River, and Black Creek and Miracle Beach on Vancouver Island where he had holidayed and fished, and where he based at least one of the beautiful meditations from *The Far Field*. Roethke said he wanted a “language [...] complicated yet passionate, full of auditory shocks and shifts” – and I would still opt for that too.

Anyone else you would mention?

Robinson Jeffers, John Crowe Ransom, Williams, Berryman, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore were the poets I taught by choice round about then. A fairly mixed bag. Poems like ‘Boats in a Fog’, ‘Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter’, Mr Bones’ diversions, and ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ – which is very moving as well as being a liturgical baroque *tour-de-force*.

Marianne Moore is probably the one I go back to most frequently. I mean, I turn a notebook page and find ‘Armor’s Undermining Modesty’, ‘Propriety’ and ‘Voracities and Verities: Sometimes Are Interacting’ in fair copy and wonder how many on the block at the moment can string that kind of stuff together. And I remember the last poem has a reference – gratifying in a peculiar way – to Colonel Jim Corbett’s *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* – one of the very few books I had read with close attention in my early teenage years.

Although I say these things, the question of influence in particular is very hard to assess, except here and there – like the short-lined skinny arrangements in some poems, which I probably derived from Creeley’s *For Love*. I recall sending a copy of a four poem pamphlet *Link-light* to David Jones in 1974, not long before he died, which was a clear acknowledgement.

What sort of things were you hoping would rub off from some of the poets you have listed?

Rigour and dexterity, elegance of expression and neatly turned syntax – a combination of these things has always been attractive. Coming back to one of your first points, though I can ramble and be exorbitant, for me: “compression is the first grace of style”. I liked Violette Leduc’s line about wanting “to achieve the brevity of a fowl pecking at a single grain of corn”. And sticking to the birds, here’s Bunting on vultures, for instance – almost a haiku in the middle of ‘The Spoils’:

Lean watches, then debauch:
after long alert, stupidity;
waking, soar.

Keep it *too* spare and you might be drawn into over-refinement, so what you produce is cryptic or costive. And I would repeat there’s nothing against letting out the slack from time to time. But I’m still inclined to slim it down and go with Stevens (the former Vice President of Hartford Accident and Indemnity, after all) who would have us invest in “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds”.

Say a bit more about structure and putting things together.

In the early days I didn’t know a lot of the time what I was up to: just feeling my way into things, and relying on sound – whether the piece made a whole sound in my head – to determine some kind of integrity. Now I’m more practiced (even if you’re lazy like me, you can fall into it) I miss that kind of foraging, though I hope I’m still capable of it. It’s probably what I was getting at when I praised Eddie Morgan a little while ago for operating *much of the time in an area of fertile uncertainty, where “the unknown is best” (as a stimulus to invention), and where the elements of song are somehow there in welcome support.*

As to “the reason-for-being of a poem in its shape,” and what determines the tone, or a sequence of variation in tone, or “a graduated kinship of moods” in Hardy’s phrase, you have to find the language and you have to find the form. Where you pick that up is anybody’s guess – but the provision of “luminous detail” is somewhere in there too. If that sounds haphazard, well, that’s a word

worth reckoning: as part of an event, an action, a fate, a thing occurring joined with chance and risk, and random in connection. The art isn't random; but the subject matter may well be. Unless you want to insist on it; and then you can insist too far or too long.

If the concept of fate looks out of place or out of order I still don't know a better word unless it's providence for what befalls you when you strike a line or phrase or mood and the poem emerges. As I said before, sound for me works all the way through – with sense and nonsense, plain or fancy, free or fixed, many-centred or interwoven.

Any literary laws to lay down?

I've never been one for manifestoes, or general theorising. In fact when I was a literary academic I shut out a lot of developing theory quite deliberately – sidestepping hermeneutics and most of those French-based contrivances. I didn't want it cluttering up my responses to poetry, and I don't feel I missed all that much. Whatever has shaped the words has been personal and not schematic. Though I'm not against criticism *per se* – especially when it happens to be true, or makes you smile.

Can you nonetheless be drawn into some theorising about what contributes to the effects of poetry?

At the level of language, the energy of poetry – its emotional and intellectual energy – springs from a mix of the demotic and the hieratic: joining up or breaking away. If one gains ascendancy, or settles in, the other will soon enough appear as a corrective. MacDiarmid and Joyce both worked to extremes of each, that's part of what makes them pre-eminent – the range and subtlety. But if you don't look out, or have no wish to stop, you can end up talking to yourself.

Maybe we can go back a bit to look at the region where you born and brought up. Do you think there is a northeast tradition, and where would you place yourself in respect to that?

What do I make of the poets of the area around where I was born? Especially those writing in the Scots language: in some cases almost sharing the idiolect I grew up with. *Ten Poets of the Northeast* was in my hand for the first time just a couple of weeks ago, after the question was raised. Plenty names I knew, but whose work I didn't know except in small selections, anthologised elsewhere. Charles Murray was in my childhood, and relished by local concert parties and so on, but I'm slightly abashed to say the poems by other names – Flora Garry, Violet Jacob, Hunter Diack and others – well known enough, I didn't really know.

The Scots is familiar and personal to me in many ways; the subject matter too, though my upbringing wasn't linked closely to farms or agriculture. John Morrison Caie caught me by surprise with a poem beginning with the name of a farm township: Nether Dallachy. It turns out he lived about 4 miles from where I was born; his father was a minister in the parish of Enzie (pronounced Ing-ee). When I was a boy I had howked and picked potatoes on a neighbouring farm during the school Tattie Holidays, and remember the

tractor's jolting approach and the forks of the digger curving through the dreels to churn out our work. We filled buckets, the buckets filled sacks or harn bags, and the harn bags filled the horse-drawn bogie.

The school represented in *Ten Poets of the Northeast* is decent, artful, humane and humorous, with an interest in folk and how they live and work and interact. The level of art for me is mostly equivalent to genre painting: so that without being deficient in motive or perception or power to entertain it nevertheless misses something absolute about it – something deeper or darker, more lyrical, and beyond the edge of practice here.

The thing is: I have written poems in the Buchan dialect all through my own poetic practice – and probably have used it best in translating others. One of the first things I did when I came back to Scotland in 1984 was translate a handful of Catullus's *carmina*, followed by versions of four sonnets by Ronsard. The Catullus pieces – foul and fragrant, and directly in the speech of the “weel-kent sites”, drew a positive response from a variety of people. The Ronsard versions (which after the first came out about one every twenty minutes) could fit right in to *Ten Poets of the Northeast*. On the other hand, ‘Catmaw’ and ‘Hyne Awa: Nae Howtowdie’, printed together with those translations in *The Moon Calf*, are in what you might call a modernist goliardic vein – caustic, up to mischief – which has irritated some reviewers: principally those with no native spoken Scots, nor any notion of what has changed in the face of the world.

I would say I'm a better craftsman than a critic; though I have cause to know my own verse and all its limitations pretty well.

The north-east is a 'thick' area for folklore, unlike most parts of the British Isle, and more like Scandinavia. I'm not wholly convinced of the joys of this; I wish Hamish Henderson had written more books of poems and done less collecting of folklore. I'm worried about the conservatism of folk-based forms. There does seem to be a problem with poets who want to abolish poetry, and withdraw inside the conventions of song. What are your thoughts on that?

The folk revival took off in the late fifties and early sixties – though, as you say, the northeast of Scotland is a “thick” area for folk tradition. I heard Jeannie Robertson sing live only once – but her rendering of the first line (and most of the rest) of ‘Mary Hamilton’ had the hair up at the back of my neck – and I said at the time quite honestly that the experience was like falling into a great pit, there was such an overwhelming sense of unbroken tradition, and vocal flourishes (her extension of the word “hairrit” for heart) that came from such a long way back.

She was a great spirit on the folk scene, and her importance to Hamish Henderson and what he wanted to show forth was unparalleled. MacDiarmid made a mistake about the folk tradition – he claimed at one late point that “no European artist of any significance owed anything to it”. Henderson said to me (and plenty others) he couldn't understand this – why MacDiarmid “wanted to kick that ladder away”. He described a conversation in the Café Royal in Edinburgh when he had indicated some of the ordinary punters in the bar and said “You see those boogers over there – they don't know about you or about Jeannie Robertson – but they *will* care, *because* of Jeannie

Robertson”. MacDiarmid didn’t like that, and came back dismissively – *Scotch dismissive* Henderson described it – “I don’t care about them”. “What *do* you care about then, Chris?” said Hamish, and got the measured response: “I care about carrying my own thing through to the end”.

So clearly, if I use the terms I brought in earlier, he was booting out the demotic, and nailing up hieratic colours – disparaging his early sources of inspiration for what he saw as some higher purpose. Henderson had every admiration for MacDiarmid, thought him a great poet beyond question, but had to fight him on this because of the risk to what he wanted to save. He thought that interest in the folk tradition was at some level an interest in *poetry* – and that any attempt to bury that tradition would diminish the arts in general.

What did you think of this?

I’m on Hamish’s side on that one. As I’ve indicated earlier, as far as the demotic and hieratic dimensions go you don’t want to dump either one. Henderson wasn’t seeking to “abolish poetry and withdraw inside the conventions of song” as you put it – he wanted both to flourish – and I don’t think he would agree with you for one minute about the balance of his own activities. The poems he *could* make, I suggest, he *did* make. The things he re-discovered, collected or puffed back into flame were a central activity not a sacrifice of his own talent.

Okay – I wouldn’t argue about that – but I still wish he had written a second great book of poetry.

Of course, I wouldn’t wish to talk you out of your regrets on that. He took on MacDiarmid because he had to – and after a while he relished it. In their public flytings it was ding and dong: and, as Hamish was fond of quoting, in these terms “great blows are delights to the mind” – and he would give an exuberant brief throaty cackle to underline that.

Maybe we can change tack again. Who would you say you are writing for?

Who do we want for an audience? “Proper places and noble souls” – that was what the Irish vagrants Clement and Dungal replied to Charlemagne when he asked the price of wisdom. Well: attentive, willing to be carried along, but not palmed off with pap or sophistry or special pleading. What *I* want on the one side is plenitude and universality, and on the other it needs to be particular and near (and said or read so you remember it). Marianne Moore put a key dilemma neatly when she said: “I think the most difficult thing [...] is to be satisfactorily lucid, yet have enough implication in it to suit myself”.

And what about performance, readings, getting the work across?

I would say most poets don’t read their work very well, even when it’s well written. There’s too much modish display, or straightforward ineptitude. Sorley McLean had a true bardic presence, with a few unconscious eccentricities, and MacCaig made a virtue of relaxed self-deprecation, and deliberately didn’t make things *difficult* for the audience – though a touch of the crocodile was never very far away. But too many contemporaries convey

no presence at all: nothing is heightened; there's neither growl nor benison. They rarely give the sense of being moved themselves by what they write or have to say, so the most they can hope for is polite acquiescence.

As an aside I'd say actors over-egg it. Not all of them – but most of them do.

What about University – we've mentioned Chicago when you were attending Northwestern – but you were an undergraduate at Aberdeen?

I wasn't a sophisticated reader of poetry at all as an undergraduate – and certainly not in the first two years. Patricia Thomson was my tutor in Advanced Special English, and I wince to remember at an early tutorial wading in with both feet to rubbish Dunbar's '*Done is a battel on the dragon blak*', before she put me to rights. I suppose I improved. In my final year I wrote essays on Marlowe and Johnson (with Voltaire) and gave Dunbar his due as well. The year before I had been fired up by Blake: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was the first piece I consciously took as a model. But it wasn't until I was transported to North America and started teaching undergraduates myself that I came at all to grips with contemporary verse and fiction.

And then how did the writing go when you got there?

Deep-Tap Tree was written through the seventies while I was living and working on Vancouver Island. 'Mr. Scales Walks His Dog' was written when I came back to the coast after the two years in Chicago – sometime in the winter of 1970 or early spring the following year. In the summer of 1977 Will Carter of the Rampant Lions Press in Cambridge had printed *Four Poems In Broadside*, and Courtland Benson made up folders with a beautiful selection of papers and beeswax finish. Those poems made up the final section of *Deep-Tap Tree*, which came out in 1978.

What else did you get in to at Aberdeen?

In my first couple of years I was caught up in a mish-mash of bookies and the pub and javelin and fencing and this and that. Pals from Shetland and the Hebrides. When I did spend time in the library it was mainly to leaf through books in the fine art section, though Aberdeen didn't offer a degree in that. I rediscovered the Flemish primitive painters, confirming an early attraction, and the early 20th century Russian women – Goncharova, Popova and Rozanova.

Later as a sideline I wrote an essay on Hieronymous Bosch and got into correspondence with someone at the Courtauld, who eventually suggested I go there and start an MPhil. By then, though, I had accepted the job at Victoria. Anthony Blunt was director of the Courtauld at that time. I sometimes wonder how my life might have changed if I had headed south at that point rather than taking the longer trek to the Pacific North-west coast.

How does Deep-Tap Tree appear to you now?

Looking at the book now it seems to me northern, Scottish and metaphysical.

How do you mean metaphysical?

How does anyone mean metaphysical? More than the rustle of leaves in a bag. Not information only, however elegantly sliced. Exorbitant; singular.

Okay, okay, hold on – anything else?

Of the book? Satirical, romantic, unfashionable. I can see various things in the background a bit more clearly now. Have already mentioned David Jones – not just the poems of course, but *Epoch and Artist* and the preface to *The Anathemata* – and either he or my friend Patrick Grant pointed me on to people like Jacques Maritain, whose Mellon Lectures on *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, for instance were a model of clarity and practical wisdom, without ever jabbing with insistence under your nose. Patrick certainly put me on to Michael Polanyi's astonishing essay *Personal Knowledge*, which is the longest and most emphatic periodic structure I have read, and which I am still unpacking. So I wasn't stuck for precepts and models of complex intellection. But who's to know what predominates, or when something important – or unimportant at the time – goes in, and just how it comes out?

Round about the time I was reading Jones and so on I also loved poems by Robinson Jeffers: his *austerity*; for instance; and there is something irrefutable and flinty in what he has to say at times. His mother was Scottish, and probably mineral too. He has an extraordinary poem about Iona and the early burials there, which the professional Scotophiles will not relish, when he refers to “jellies of arrogance and terror” to conjure the monstrous presence of the kings long gone.

Do you see anything that provides links to themes, or pins to structure in what you were writing?

Venery is a thread through *Deep-Tap Tree*. The myth of Actaeon has always been a clue for me – though it doesn't figure directly in the book. It did in the nasty wee pastiche *Mr Scales at the Auction*, where the central figure is brought to a similar sticky end. I took a look at Ted Hughes' versions of the *Metamorphoses* when the book came out, to compare it with Rolfe Humphries' translation and other people's. Went straight to the dogs (as you do) – the list of hounds lined up to sink their teeth in – and was straightaway disappointed.

A bit bland?

Well, a missed opportunity. Sometimes I feel my personality is still basically rooted in the Medieval or just later. Plenty evidence of that in *Deep-Tap Tree*. Maritain I remember was a good source for quotes and stories too – like the one where Michaelangelo gives advice to his pupil Marco da Siena that he should always make his figures *pyramidal, serpentlike and multiplied by two or three* – and of course you don't have to trip too far to turn that kind of stuff into poetry. I liked the high-mindedness of those Catholic poets and commentators – and I liked their spirit too, if I can get away with saying that.

Here is Maritain in a pure, clear, antiquated style talking about the *unprecedented* nature of the thing made – or on *poesis* in the wider sense: “*The great witness of it remains Cézanne. More to be sure than Manet or any other, he has been the liberating figure in contemporary art: precisely because he was so*

totally, he seemed so obdurately and desperately intent upon that bound, buried significance of Visible Things, which he felt perpetually escaping him in proportion as he took hold of it". That word bound is the key link to religion in Maritain's sense – religio means a binding – and around material like that I warmed to the idea of art as a connatural habit of self and spirit.

But you don't haul that baggage around with you all the time do you.?

Hardly – there's plenty else going on right up to Leadbelly, loblolly, Cullen skink and dirty dancing.

Sounds a bit like a line from 'Unfinished Business'.

I guess that's part of the point. I thought in that piece maybe I could make a final reckoning in that satiric vein, mopping up some choice bits, but there's always more turning up and stinking out a corner – determined to have a good time!

On the one hand you can't get much more hieratic than Maritain's descriptions of prudence, say, as "*the straight intellectual determination of something to be done,*" or poetry as "*a mineral purity*" (shades of Jeffers again). But there are divinations of various kinds, under different auspices, some of them raucous, some of them psychotropic (I have this by report) and, as far as the dedication to that poem goes, I could even suggest that Paracelsus was at the head of the queue along with CMG, as well as several others. There is always a potent, disreputable or anarchic side that's liable to stick – "like a burr, sir," says Lucio in *Measure for Measure*.

In all this, though, I would still agree it is "*by love and not by obscure collusion*" as Maritain maintains that we find ourselves in what we make or do. In fact, I put that thought into a small poem in memory of George Mackay Brown – who of course is right in line with Jones or Hopkins and that particular dimension. In a quite different but explicit way it's also in a poem for Norman MacCaig, 'Didn't Do', which gets off to a fairly indecorous start.

And can be read as a corrective against the standard kind of mush for tribute, I assume.

I would say so.

Anything you would add?

I wanted to say something more about interlacing. I'm not sure if it is a sustained device or not – it certainly was meant to be in 'Helix' – which never really looked as good on the page as it did in my head or in the air. I tried twirling the lines round a central axis – but the software wasn't there then. I remember setting it all out on the floor of a cedar-built house about half a mile along the beach from the mouth of the Oyster River. Late seventies; early eighties. It was a long zigzag trail of paper. I didn't think anyone else would take to it. 'An Ounce of Wit to a Pound of Clergy' came out of that spell too, though it was a long time before it found its way round. Gael Turnbull liked it, and made a pamphlet, *Carbuncle's Culinary*, out of it in 1992.

So what's interlaced there? In terms of personalities, there's Roethke – with Oyster River. Then W.S. Graham, whose poems were coming out in the *Malahat Review* in Victoria, published from the university where I worked – 'Johann Joaquin Quantz's First Lesson', maybe pieces from 'Malcolm Mooney's Land', 'Implements in their Places'. Robin Skelton as editor was taking these pretty well as they were produced – at least that was the impression I got. Also I met Basil Bunting when he came as a visiting writer to Victoria in 1971. August Kleinzahler, Brent Mackay and Terry Humby would give me news of what went on in Bunting's classes, since they were students of mine too for a spell.

So you were teaching there at the same time?

I was teaching there *exactly* at the same time – that's why I couldn't sit in on his classes! Anyway I was lucky to meet him, and liked him a lot, then and later. By contrast, I pretty well dodged Sydney Graham when he came to read and stay for a short while in Victoria. I was working up-Island then and didn't drive down. His own accounts of the trip will tell you how that was probably a good thing. Out of nerves or drink or something Graham behaved badly and felt worse. My pal Lawrence Russell fell foul of him at the reading and still won't hear a good word. The university library at Victoria has quite a collection of his stuff, and later I discovered his compensating virtues. His poem to Robin's children is ominous and touching. He put most of his best impulses into his poems – and his letters as well. People are jumping on the bandwagon at the moment, and that's okay: but it's been a long haul for proper recognition to come round at all, especially in Scotland.

And interlacing in the poems themselves?

Well, I touched on 'Helix' – but there's a different kind of construction in 'Lyke-wake' which is much earlier, and combines images from the landscape of my childhood with various other deposits – some early historical, some almost mythological. At one point the poem carried a dedication to my father and grandfather, and my maternal grandfather figures in the opening, standing on the Hill of Maud overlooking the town and harbour, with a view along the coast to the west of Buckie and across the Moray Firth. This "real" landscape is picked up again in the final section before a ceremonial close.

In the middle sections among imagined medieval settings, there are interwoven glimpses of a triptych of the 'Annunciation' by the Master of Flémalle, which hangs in The Cloisters in New York. When I went to see the piece I found it in a room where it was the only art work hanging on the wall, but there was an oak hexagonal table – I think it's hexagonal – like the one in the painting, and on it an Italian faience vase with Easter lilies – again just as in the work – so the fragrance in the room was the same as in the painting. The only other people there apart from me were a large, black, uniformed security guard, and a kid from Harlem doing a high school assignment.

What's implicit is always hard to sort out – but of course there was the impact too of all the people and places I knew during that period – though they don't make explicit appearances. It doesn't matter for the poem's sake in 'Undertow', for example, that the two feathers first circled the river pool in a civic park in Nanaimo. Or that copies of 'Construct by Simple Succession' had

been pinned up in all six elevators in the Hyatt Regency in Vancouver during a conference on alternative lifestyles (which had Sufi dancing, Chief Rolling Thunder, Ina May Gaskin and Spiritual Midwifery; even buzzards and bald eagles circling overhead!). And that as I went up and down with my sheaf of poems I never went in to a lift but I had to post another one up.

Coming back to decoration and stylistic devices, if you jump forward a little there are signs in poems like 'Incantation', or 'Mao and the Death of Birds' of an unembellished style: even though one piece totally dispenses with irony, and the other leans on it rhetorically at key points before an unmistakably straightforward conclusion. I would just say again you need both options, and I'm happy to vary the textures as I also said before. Melismatic or unadorned: that's another important spectrum to reckon with.

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