
The One and the Many

The poet Anne Stevenson interviewed by Nicholas Murray

Recently described by the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, as “One of the most remarkable poetic voices to have emerged on either side of the Atlantic in the last fifty years,” Anne Stevenson, poet, critic and biographer, grew up in post World War II United States and came to England in the 1950s. Daughter of the American philosopher C.L. Stevenson, her work is distinguished for what C.B. McCully has called its “passionate thinking” and Elizabeth Jennings, “a sturdy backbone of intellectual vigour”. Of her *Selected Poems* (1987) Peter Levi wrote: “Stevenson’s style is capable of a terse brilliance which is like moral wit, and also of a long and beautiful movement of language, but there is always the same surprising and hard-bitten objectivity about it... She is one of the greatest women artists in the country.” Reviewing *Granny Scarecrow* for the *TLS* in December, Gerard Woodward commented: “Stevenson has matured into one of the most intelligent, assured, vivid and skilful poets writing today.”

Nicholas Murray is a biographer, poet, novelist and critic. He lives in Powys.

Can we start with Wales with which you have had a long association? You have a home in north Wales and in the early 1980s you started the Poetry Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye (in a former morgue I believe!) and you are a member of the Welsh Academy. I wondered what it means to you as a place and also how its traditions influence your work or your ideas about poetry.

Wales — I should say Ardudwy — is, for me, a wonderful country in which to write poetry, though I don’t know why, unless, having no personal roots here, I feel freer of my own life and time. In good weather, the very air sparkles with cynganedd. Climb two hundred feet in Cwm Nantcol and you are in the heart of one of the great geological landscapes of the world, one where it is the modernity of the megalithic builders — our first farmers, after all — that

resonates so strongly. But yes, my first experience of the country occurred late in the Seventies, when Michael Farley, Alan Halsey and I founded The Poetry Bookshop in that dead morgue in Hay. There, in the beautiful romantic valley of the Wye, I wrote romantic poems like "Swifts" and "Himalayan Balsam". I was ten years older when I settled down with Peter Lucas, who, like me, has become at a late age a confirmed Darwinian and student of the natural sciences. His family's cottage in the Rhinogs (pictured on the front of my *Poems 1955-2005*) has become our Welsh home, where nature's nature, so to speak, carries on with its own climate in its own way without asking to be romanticised. Not that we don't feel part of the Welsh-speaking community. In many ways I feel more comfortable among our friends around Llanbedr than in the more self-conscious company of urban poets and academics. Writing poetry isn't an academic discipline, you know.



Anne Stevenson.
(Photo by Annie
Lennox.)

You are an American national and grew up in the States yet you have spent most of your life in Britain. Has this dual citizenship, literally or metaphorically, helped or hindered? Is it something that matters to you as a poet?

The feeling I have of being at home in Wales and yet not Welsh extends to my feelings about America. I am, of course, grateful to the American foundations that bestowed such generous prizes on me last year. But patriotism is like religion, it consolidates by dividing people into groups — too often warring groups. Incapable of adopting any sort of orthodox faith or fixed loyalty, I can only stand aside and observe. This attitude may seem elitist, as if I felt superior to people with strong nationalist feelings, but in fact I am mainly a stickler for honesty. For me, the role of a poet is the reverse of a politician's. Politics, indeed like poetry, is in part a language game — isn't "all the world", as Shakespeare saw it, a stage full of games-playing actors? And yet, the lies or half-truths of political discourse are too coarse for any poet who sees through "the human screen" into the eddying mists of the unsayable under the surface. Journalists, of course, are licensed to attack the villains of politics and

bring powerful rule-breakers to book; that's all very right and proper. But poets, like novelists, have to explore all sides of the on-going human drama. So I see the writer's role — or I should say my role, because I realise I am an exception to a good deal of current practice — as more psychological than political. I am also constantly aware of how major issues in one era become history in the next. As stated in my poem, "The Fiction-Makers": "We think we are living now, but we are living then."

Is it useful to be (to use Forster's phrase about Cavafy) "at an odd angle to the universe", having the freedom to take an oblique view of belonging?

Yes, that's what I've been trying to say. It's encouraging to be in the company of a great poet like Cavafy.

The question of influence is always a tricky one but do you recognise any particular poetic debts or is it a matter of certain abiding enthusiasms? In a recent interview to mark the publication of your Library of America volume you said you were increasingly drawn back to some of the canonical names in the earlier English tradition.

Well, I was introduced to poetry by a father who used to read Shakespeare and the nineteenth-century narrative poets aloud after family suppers. He also read us Yeats, who, with the Elizabethans, set the tone for my first lyrics. In high school I idolised Keats and Robert Frost. Then, in the early 1960s, I discovered Elizabeth Bishop, wrote to her in Brazil, published a short book about her, and was thereafter "influenced". But my personal experiences at that time were more akin to Sylvia Plath's, who died just as I was beginning to appreciate Bishop's cool objectivity. Now, at seventy-five, I feel I am my own woman. "I write what I like," as Steve Biko once said (in very different circumstances).

One of the advantages of a long career is the reward of perspective. How do you think the art of poetry has changed in recent decades? Do cultural and linguistic changes mean that poetry has started to sound different, to work with different assumptions, proceed from different starting points?

In short, yes. How can the lazy English of television chat shows and celebrity interviews — not to mention the international ubiquity of American pop music and video images — fail to change the contours of the language? I feel sorry for the over-indulged young who, for all their mobile phones and digital know-how, are unwittingly disadvantaged by the feebleness of today's sound bite language. Reading some of the "new poetry" is, for me, not unlike walking into a fashion boutique and realising that nothing on sale bears any resemblance to a garment I would conceivably wear. It's

not that young poets today don't take their writing seriously; it's obvious they care a lot about it. It's that I can't help reacting negatively to its general shapelessness. Just as a young woman's body — shaped today much as it always has been — looks best in clothes that conform to its natural curves and movements, so a new poem sounds best when it pays homage to the natural curves of the language. It gets harder and harder to "make it new" and still make it last. Ezra Pound, in the early twentieth century, tried to get rid of the "god damn iamb", and failed; his ear was too good. The same echoes of tradition can be heard in Eliot's and Stevens's "free" verse, as they can in Plath's and Elizabeth Bishop's. As far as I can make out, making it new in the early twenty-first century too often means deliberately cutting the words against the natural lines of the language, forgetting that sound, rhythm and form in poetry are what make it memorable.

And yet, poetry does have to change if it is to survive, doesn't it? With so much university and Arts Council support these days, a flood of new poetry is pouring out of workshops and creative writing classes — in both Britain and America.

When I feel depressed, I sometimes imagine what Auden or Larkin would say about the treadmill mediocrity of most poetry written with a qualifying MA or PhD in mind. (We know what Yeats had to say about "those now growing up/All out of shape from toe to top"). But sure, it's a positive sign that in a world threatening to make robots of us all so much is being written and published. There are a lot of good poets writing today, and some of the best are brilliant performers. Jazz, and Jamaican rap have immensely extended poetry's rhythmic range, and in Wales, there is no shortage of modern bards playing variations on old forms, in Welsh and in English.

Is there a "craft" of poetry that needs to be learned or is freedom to create in whatever way one wishes the paramount need?

Yes, there's a "craft", though I don't much care for the term "creative writing". Beginners learn most, I think, from imitating poems they admire, though a sensitive teacher can make all the difference to a young poet looking for a personal voice. I learned an immense amount from Donald Hall at Michigan, for instance. Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley were lucky to be taught by Philip Hobsbaum. Still, the best way to teach craft — metrics, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, etc — is by demonstration and example. I owe a great deal to my high school English teachers, who taught poetry by reading it aloud and making us memorise and recite it. And of course the tradition of oral poetry remains very strong in Wales.

Do you look on the follies of the contemporary poetry scene (its celebrity obsessions, its culture of prizes etc) with a benign indifference or a Swiftian indignation?

Well, I usually try to sound benign and kindly, but I admit to suffering privately from indignation sometimes. I subscribe to at least eight literary periodicals, but it so upsets me to read them that I usually pile them up unopened until I feel strong enough to leaf through looking for something to admire.

Your work, it seems to me, is characterised by great clarity and lucidity. Where does this come from? Your early upbringing?

I suppose so. In my family, lucidity was a virtue, muddle-headedness, almost a crime. My father regarded some of his philosophical colleagues with considerable "Swiftian indignation". Towards the end of his life, he even worked it off in verse:

When I am dead, I think the loss of me
Will not be noticed by philosophy,
For my devotion to analysis
Has caused emotional paralysis.
And yet, ontologies by others done,
Whose incoherence simply smothers one,
Lead me to think that my austerity
Deserves a tribute from posterity.

Perhaps because his philosophy was so austere, he indulged his emotions at the piano. Music was a discipline I shared with him and my sisters — I was the cellist in the family, my two sisters were violinists-violists. It's such a relief that music, which combines a mathematical system with powerful emotion, communicates without words. Unfortunately, deafness makes it impossible for me to play the cello now, but I still console myself for an hour or two each day ruminating over Bach or Beethoven on the piano.

You have spoken about poems starting as a form of "dictation", a line perhaps arising in your head and demanding completion in a poem. Could you say something about how you write, how a poem is born?

I don't think I am exceptional in depending on "givens" to begin a poem. I often hear lines in dreams and wake wondering how to go on. I almost never start out with a prose idea and turn it into a poem — unless, of course, I'm asked for verses for a special occasion. Let me give you an example of the dream that produced "Before Eden" in *Stone Milk*. It must have been March, 2007, when I woke early one morning at Pwllymarch with a complete stanza in my head:

A day opens, a day closes.
Each day like every other day.
No day is like another day.

Where did it come from, this odd effusion? And what could I do with it, what poem did it suggest? I got up, found the note-pad in which I jot down promising lines in pencil and seated at the dining table had no trouble whatsoever completing four more three-line stanzas. They simply arranged themselves on the paper without me. And then I was stuck. This first section had played with some idea of — well, perhaps you could call it the unrepeatable nature of things that seem the same: days, waves, walls, stones, sea-gulls. The fifth stanza ended with a scary question:

What claims identity
That isn't self-propelled, vicious, multiple, alone?

Now, don't ask me why I thought of that. As I say, the lines simply appeared. It did occur to me at the time that the poem would have to do with the selfishness of nature — the selfish gene, if you like. And also, perhaps, with the perception that identity is rarely singular; more often it belongs to a "universal" category. Still, thinking got me nowhere. I tried for days (and nights) to get on with the poem, but failed again and again until I gave up and put the stanzas away in my "unfinished" file.

Months later, I happened upon the painting by Paul Stangroom that I knew was right for the cover of *Stone Milk* and the Alpine setting of its title poem. It depicts a rhododendron forest in the Himalayas, high above Dharmasala, and the more I looked at it, the more I felt I had to write another poem. This time it was my husband who gave me a title, "Before Eden". So I went back to those stranded five stanzas and set to work turning that scientific hunch into a creation myth, using Genesis as a base. I do not, of course, believe that God created the world in six days. I'm a Darwinian; I don't believe God created the world at all! Nevertheless, the poem took the form of a story, which suited a book that essentially has to do with the imaginative nature of myth. It took a week of hard writing — no dreams this time — to call it finished. Curiously, its two final stanzas again appeared without my being conscious of where they'd come from:

It was silence that broke him [God] in the end.
With every perfect day identical,
No animating evil could arise.

So God bent down and sighed the words
 "I will."
 He spoke, and Adam opened all his eyes.

You have also spoken of the three elements of a poem: cadence, imagery, argument. Is this a willed process or is it a more a question of listening out?

Everything I write depends on keeping my imagination open and listening out. This is at first an unconscious process. Later, my working mind takes over, eventually handing the poem over to my critical sense. There's always a stage when I think I've lost it, and that's when I ask myself (or a trusted poet friend) what's wrong. Is there too much argument here and not enough imagery? Are the rhythms ungainly? But all this conscious tinkering happens after a poem seems finished and I come back to it after the inspiration has burned off.

You have, as your fine recent sequence, "A Lament for the Makers", shows known many of the most prominent post-war poets (not least Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes). How important has it been to you as a poet to interact with your peers? What have you learned from the contact and who has been the most important for your own career?

Though I don't regard poetry as a team sport, I've certainly learned from my peers — many no longer alive. "A Lament for the Makers" pays homage to, among others, Philip Hobsbaum, Peter Redgrove, Frances Horovitz, Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Larkin. Others, such as Geoffrey Dutton in Scotland, Seamus Heaney in Ireland, Gillian Clarke in Wales, Andrew Motion in Oxford have been helpful critics in the past. Recently I've been relying on the critical acumen of Angela Leighton, Helena Nelson, Peter Scupham, and not least, Lee Harwood, a frequent visitor to us in North Wales.

Actually writing "A Lament for the Makers" anticipated the writing of "Before Eden". I started it without any idea of its becoming an extended elegy. In October 2001, I decided to read *Piers Plowman* from beginning to end, with an idea of translating at least the Prologue into modern English. One evening, after a session with Langland, I fell into a sort of trance, gazing out my study window at the beech trees turning gold in the wood behind our house. Five stanzas materialised and wrote themselves in my head:

Unsatisfied by summer,
 memory hardly anticipates
 the darkening year.

But now it's here,
the season of deciduous souls,
gold smouldering to umber
when the sun illuminates
briefly that reredos of beeches
with Byzantine fire.

A last, late finger of grace
still brightens far reaches
of a barbarous empire
lyrically and lovingly.
Most of what we write
time will erase.

I thought these lines sounded beautiful — their leisurely rhythm, the rhymes woven through them — surely they were leading somewhere. What was I going to do with them? Well, you know what, over the years, I did. After Peter Redgrove died, it occurred to me to work the four or five completed sections of what looked to be a medieval dream poem into an elegy, not only for him, but really for poetry itself — at least, for the kind of poetry that, at my lowest ebb, I imagine is about to disappear from Western civilisation. The idea of giving poets and deceased friends speaking parts in the poem occurred much later, and I'm not absolutely sure that it works. However, I can't change it. I still think "The Lament" is one of my best poems — if only for the way it sounds when you read it aloud.

You suggested that your latest volume, Stone Milk, was your last but I sense the beginnings of a recantation. We will see more work won't we?

I shall not, of course, stop writing poems. What would I do if I didn't? Whether I publish another book depends on gifts received and the energy I can muster to make something of them. That the Library of America has seen fit to publish my *Selected Poems*, has given me fresh confidence. Andrew Motion's clear, fair and I think perceptive introduction has also restored my faith in my ability to keep the doors and windows of my imagination open, even though, according to the Bible, I am well past my sell-by date.

Two poems by Anne Stevenson

CARING MORE THAN CARING

For the Welsh poet Dewi Stephen Jones

So, we will not meet, we'll never sit
Filling in the silence, smiling bravely,
Chatting about the weather, sipping tea,
As if time's passing mattered not a bit
And age's roughcast could be faced with wit.
Nothings will not be handed on politely
To lighten hours that otherwise might be
Heavy with language caring won't admit.

I not visiting, you not wanting me —
Will failure bring us close to understanding
The unsaid rules of truth in poetry?
Not playing well is sometimes more demanding
Than playing to win, where winning would be lying,
Where losing is a kind of setting free.

TULIPS

For my birthday you've bought me tulips.
I want them to fan from a low vase.
This one — sap-white beneath its cracked glaze
and almost the shape of a bulb — is right.

There is always a new war, but
these tall disciplined redcoats
have lost the battle.
Cut down, shipped alive into exile,
for nearly a week they bleed upright.

Flaming tulips in the grass-white pot
my sister gave me... was it 1958?
Repeat of the same brave show in 2008.
Trussed geese, their dawn beaks stretched for flight.

Two artists: this one who catches
the incendiary character of tulips
with daring panache.
Now this one, who uses his brush
like a hawk's eyesight.

When Nerys in her wheelchair painted tulips
they were strawberry-coloured, like her hair.
She gave them life a life far longer
than the one life gave her.
Sometimes when nature imitates art,
nature loses the fight.

Old tulips, getting ready to die,
swan on their wondering necks away
from their source in mother water,
obsessed with an airy faith in light.

Sad women in mauve, making up for
wrinkled dugs with pinker hair,
spill themselves drunkenly over the bar.
Lips, lips — without love or appetite.

At the core of each crumpled tulip,
a dark star —
a hope-pod, a living berry
the seminal colour of night.
