

ANNE STEVENSON IN CONVERSATION

Helena Nelson teaches communication at a college in Fife. She has had poems published in The Rialto, The Dark Horse, and elsewhere. This interview was conducted, primarily by e-mail, during February and March, 2000.

Helena Nelson: Anne, in one of your Michigan essays you say that you think poetry should be ‘at the very least, memorable’. Andrew Motion, the new Poet Laureate, is strongly in favour of children ‘learning poems by heart.’ Many adults grew up soundly loathing Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’ as a result of this process. What did you mean by ‘memorable’? Do you think memorising poems is important, and if so, why?

Anne Stevenson: Well, yes, I’m generally in favour of children learning poems by heart, but your question is rather more complicated than it seems. As a child I loved memorising poems — it was something I was good at, a compensation, maybe, for being bad at arithmetic. But the ‘memorableness’ of a poem depends on the poet who makes it, not on the child who is made to learn it. The poems I learned in school were rhythmical and they rhymed: songs, nonsense rhymes (‘The Owl and the Pussy Cat’, ‘You are Old Father William’), ballads, narratives like Macaulay’s ‘Horatius at the Bridge’ or Alfred Noyes’ ‘The Highwayman’. There was a time when I could recite the whole of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Such poems are easy to remember because the ear naturally picks up rhymes and meters. But most free verse of the twentieth century is not geared for remembering. Much of the Poet Laureate’s own verse would be difficult for a child to get by heart. I wouldn’t want to say that writing free verse is wrong. It’s more that free verse is just that much more difficult to make memorable. Wallace Stevens managed with ‘The Snow Man’, for example, because the cadences sound well in the ear. Eliot wrote very little free verse that was actually ‘free’ of classical echoes. Today free verse has broken right away from those echoes, and most of it, to my ear, fails. I can’t see future generations of children wanting to memorise very much of it.

HN: So what makes a poem memorable?

AS: All sorts of imponderables: rhythms, concise lines, cadences, unusual turns of phrase. At a funeral the other day I found myself quoting Emily

Dickinson's

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers —
Untouched by Morning —
And untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of Satin — and Roof of Stone!

I was recoiling, I suppose, from the religious certainty of the service. My friend met death calmly, believing she would rise and greet her husband 'on the other side'. That seemed to me unlikely, yet I found the Anglican Service moving. The memorable thing about Dickinson's poem — I had never thought about it before — is its stark ambiguity. Emily was sceptical, too, but she put it so gently. Imagine all the patient Christian dead waiting in their coffins for the Judgement Day. And the ultimate despair, that it was not happening, that it was probably not going to happen. "Rafter of Satin — and Roof of Stone!" is simple genius. Look how the ambivalence in those lines is suggested, not affirmed. A believer could read them as a celebration of the soul's triumph over time. But the ambiguity is created by images, not arguments. Listen to the sound of the poem, to the noises it makes. What makes it stick in the mind? I didn't know until I began saying it to myself that I knew the poem 'by heart'.

HN: Music has always been an important part of your life, music and poetry. Yet in recent years your hearing has been impaired. David Wright, who was deaf, said "it is not necessary to be able to hear in order to hear. The inner ear exists as much as the inner eye..." Does this make sense to you?

AS: Very much so. I admire David Wright particularly for the rhythmic grace of his poems. It's no exaggeration to say that I write by ear, for the ear. That 'inner ear' that was a gift to Wright is (to me) what makes a poet a poet. I like to distinguish between cadence, the rhythm in the ear, and mechanical meter. David Wright, like me I think, wrote according to cadence, sometimes in free verse, sometimes in structured forms. But his lines are always musical, always shaped to rise and fall in sympathy with their meaning. Sound and sense develop together. When I begin to write a poem I have a vague idea of something I want to say; it hovers in front of me like a mirage until I find a first line, or at least a line that clarifies it. The struggle, after that, between idea and form, is never won by either side. There's always a compromise. That's why successful poems (lyrics, sonnets etc., not so much

narratives) partly write themselves. When you write an essay or a story you generally have an overall 'plot' in mind: 'I'm going to start here and end there'. Lyric poetry, at least for me, doesn't work that way. Even when I work to a formal pattern or structure, I let meaning and sound loose to mate as they will. I like Robert Frost's notion that a poem 'rides its own melting' like a piece of ice on a stove.

HN: Your biography of Sylvia Plath, *Bitter Fame*, had a somewhat ironic title in view of the effect it had on your own public status. You received considerable critical flak from reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic and were yourself accused of bitterness, jealousy, vindictiveness etc. Many readers, even yet, connect your name with the controversial Plath biography rather than with your own poetry. Are you sorry you wrote it?

AS: No, no. I'm not sorry I wrote *Bitter Fame*, it's a fair biography, perhaps a little premature given Plath's hallowed status among the more extreme Feminists, but I think Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* came to its rescue, don't you? You may not believe this, but though I am ambitious, I have no desire to write for an audience of worshippers. I dare say Plath, had she lived, would have felt the same. What I learned from writing *Bitter Fame* was to avoid the Plath-Hughes publicity-circus like poison and concentrate on the poems. And when I did that, I discovered to my surprise that I strongly disagreed with the whole mythological-cum-astrological set-up cultivated by both poets. Sylvia Plath was perhaps the last great Romantic, and her gifts were manifold and marvellous. But she was also negative and nihilistic, and the world's outgrown her 'mythology' already. I mean we've outgrown, or should have outgrown, personal psychodrama and the anthropocentric assumptions she shared with Ted. I don't believe, for instance, that the world was created with human 'fate' in mind. I don't believe the moon and stars have a say in what happens in our lives. I don't believe in Goddesses, white, black, red or orange. I am not, in short, superstitious, and my own reading since writing *Bitter Fame* has been chiefly in the field of history or in the natural sciences. Anyone who reads my recent work attentively will see that is so.

HN: You say you are ambitious. What sort of ambitions do you have?

AS: Well, I feel I've worked through an ordeal of sorts in my poetry, and now I would like it to be read and understood. Not because I think my own life has been so important; more because I think from *Correspondences* on

I've been trying to express feelings and ideas that still confuse my contemporaries. For example, having sampled what you might call romantic egotism (or even Freudian romanticism) I've turned right away from it. Also, having experimented with free verse, blank verse, and metrical orthodoxy, I think I know what I'm doing, at last, with rhythms and sounds.

HN: Of Plath you say, 'Unless a reader knows something of this poet's biography many of her references will be lost.' Suppose, just suppose, someone were to write your biography as a way of approaching your life and work. What advice would you give them? Would you like your biography to be written?

AS: Well, I wouldn't mind if someone felt impelled to free me from my reputation as a vindictive Plath basher! From my early poems and from *Correspondences* I think a biographer might learn a fair amount about my mistakes. From my recent poems, more about me, as I have emerged from the cauldron of making (sorry, romantic exaggeration) to engage with other questions. Questions of travel and place like Elizabeth Bishop's merge into questions of affection, of right and wrong, of time and timelessness; questions that address the responsibilities — and strangeness — of being alive. And of being conscious that death or non-being, no matter what you do, is just a step away from wherever you are.

HN: Commenting on Elizabeth Bishop in *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*, you say that 'placing her' was difficult, that you 'hadn't then realized that one needn't always place poets; and such a thing as a women's tradition never then occurred to me.' Do you see yourself as 'placeable', within a women's tradition, or any other?

AS: No, probably not very placeable. I want to write good poetry but I don't care to belong to a stable. Not even the formalist stable of Dana Gioia and The Story Line Press in America. I don't like categories at the best of times, and we are living in one of the worst of times. For the arts and humanities, I mean. It's a great time for science and technology, but I believe it's going to take artists a long time before they can follow Wordsworth's advice and stand spiritually by the side of the scientists in our too materialistic, too commercially minded age. As for a Woman's Tradition, well, I'm all for women, naturally, but I don't think we need a tradition of our own. Certainly not one that opposes a Men's Tradition. Poets will be lucky if they inherit anything like a literary tradition at all in the years to come.

HN: In 1996 OUP published your *Collected Poems 1955-1995*. Now this summer, Bloodaxe Books is publishing a new collection, *Granny Scarecrow*. How do you see your work developing? If you had lived in America instead of Britain, would your poetry be different? Why are you better known in Britain?

AS: To answer the last question first, I'm not known in America because I haven't wanted to take part in the U.S. race for fame. I've never been an academic, and after some bad experiences in the so-called Poetry World, I decided never, ever to think again about becoming a celebrity. If I had lived in America I might have written differently, yes. But not that differently. Although I said earlier that I don't want to belong to the Formalist stable, I have to say that the living poets I admire in America include Derek Walcott, Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice, Anthony Hecht, Dana Gioia, David Mason, and others of that ilk. I have always liked Frost and Elizabeth Bishop, both Americans. But I don't think I'm indebted so much to any poet (apart from Herbert and Yeats) as I am to, say, Primo Levi on the one hand and 18th century European composers on the other. And I should mention that I've learned quite a lot from writers such as Conrad, and even from low brow thriller writers like John Grisham, about keeping narratives moving. I would like my next book to consist of historical narratives, monologues from the still-remembered decades of the 20th century. I think of calling the book *Prisoners....*

HN: Keats in 1819 observed that 'poems are common as newspapers.' Today the *New Yorker* receives an estimated 90,000 submissions annually. Is it possible, amongst such a quantity, that today's good poets may disappear without trace?

AS: Yes, I suppose good poets can be lost, at least for a while, although history has a way of turning up the best eventually. I suspect there are very few mute inglorious Miltons around, even today. The taste of our own time is no measure of whose work will last. Father Hopkins has long outlasted Bridges, who was Poet Laureate in his day; who reads Bridges now? Emily Dickinson published only four or five poems during her lifetime, outclassed by the far more popular Helen Hunt Jackson. Ivor Gurney, who was for many years neglected as a war poet, has made a huge comeback in the past decade or two, thanks to the critical acumen of Jon Silkin, P.J. Kavanagh, John Lucas and Arnold Rattenbury, among others. John Clare, too, is today warmly valued — in some quarters he's considered greater than Keats. I

don't think poets should be all that concerned about their reputations, now or in the future. Just keep writing as well as you can. As for the 90,000 submissions to the *New Yorker*, or, for that matter, the thousands of poems that pour into the National Poetry Competition: now how many of those are really poems? Maybe a hundred, at a generous assessment. And say, among those hundred or so goodish poems the judges miss a great one — I mean one that will be considered great in a hundred years' time — because their own tastes are questionable, or because they can't agree, or whatever. No, no, it's not our job to pick winners, it's our job to continue writing poems, however unfashionable or unappreciated. I have to add that I don't at all like the poetry competition business. Treating poetry-writing as if it were a team sport is bad for poetry, in my opinion.

HN: What is your view of what is often referred to as "The Establishment"? I take this to mean: University English Departments, school curriculum devisers, The Poetry Book Society, the big-name magazines, the big-prize competition judges, ie, those who decide, for good or ill, who and what will be published and studied.

AS: The only establishment worth belonging to is, of course, the one that embraces, among others, Dante and Shakespeare, Herbert and Donne, Wordsworth and Keats, Emily Dickinson, W.H.Auden, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath. Everyone knows that the Western establishment is now referred to as "The Canon" and is presently in the process of being undermined, if not blown to pieces, in the interests of an anti-imperialist, ethnically correct 'non-canon' of poets from formerly persecuted minorities. As you can guess, I don't have much time for this sort of anti-establishmentarianism (the first long word I ever memorized!), nor do I bother much about not getting poems into canonical papers such as the *TLS* and the *LRB*. On the whole, they don't publish poems I like. I've dropped my memberships of The Poetry Society and the Poetry Book Society for the same reason, and I almost never submit poems to competitions.

On the other hand, I am not canonical myself, and I'm especially cautious about pronouncing on whole categories of anything. Some years ago my husband and I agreed to abide, in so far as we could, by a principle we came to call 'The Rule of Some'. Not a rule of thumb, but a rule of some that would outlaw talk about generalized social categories such as 'women', 'Americans', 'Blacks', 'women poets', 'academics', 'The Establishment' and so forth. Every time one of us says something like, 'men love to be in power', or 'women have always been victims', the other has to interrupt with 'SOME

men love power;’ ‘SOME women have been victimised.’ You’d be surprised at how often in ordinary conversation one falls into bad habits of generalization.

HN: But does that matter so very much?

AS: It wouldn’t matter, of course, if this habit hadn’t become so influential. The categorizing mind is a lazy mind that shies away from first-hand thinking and prefers to talk in slogans. Like advertisers and propagandists. Ultimately, categorical non-thinking leads to ideologies like Fascism and Soviet Union type Communism, or the kind of nationalism that is coming out of Serbia today. Politicians have to think in categories; they have to assume such blocks exist: the Trades Union vote, the Black vote, the Jewish vote etc., though intelligent politicians (when there are any) are well aware of the differences that exist between individuals. Now, for me, poetry should represent the opposite extreme. It is incumbent on every poet who loves his art (her art!) to assume the burden of recreating people as people and not robots, whatever their category. It’s a sad day for poetry when most people allow an ‘Establishment’ to determine the tastes of poets and poetry readers. Frankly, I don’t think many real poets pay ‘The Establishment’ much attention. I think of Peter Scupham, for instance, of Anne Ridler, Elizabeth Jennings, the late Joy Scovell. One of the things I most liked about Ted Hughes was his instinctive distrust of ‘establishments’ especially of academics. (Not all academics, just some!) I was sorry when Ted became Poet Laureate because I didn’t think his talents were suited to the job. And I was right. Ted’s worst poems are those he wrote for state occasions. His best poetry is subversive, sometimes violent, but always written in his own blood, as it were.

All this has come a long way from the original topic — The Establishment — but the simple answer is that I don’t want to be party to any orthodoxy. I am sensible that The Poetry Society and the Poetry Book Society, for example, are doing ‘some’ good. I don’t believe in encouraging the untalented to write for publication or of giving (mostly mediocre) poetry huge prizes. But it is important to encourage people to read poems — and judge for themselves. I suppose, according to my rule, I can honestly say I like some poetry, and that poetry, these days, is not usually ‘Establishment’ poetry, though it sometimes is!

HN: Most poets have recurring symbols, ideas or motifs in their work. One of yours seems to be the idea of a cross. Crosses, for example, feature in

‘Making Poetry’, ‘From an Unfinished Poem’, ‘Gannets Diving’ and even in the poem from which your forthcoming collection takes its title, ‘Granny Scarecrow’. Can you say something about this?

AS: Yes. In the early nineteen-eighties I went through a period of being intensely interested in religion and began to attend Anglican services somewhat in the spirit of Emily Dickinson’s ‘Better an *ignis fatuus* than no illume at all.’ Later I found myself writing a long poem, almost a novel, about betrayal and disappointed expectations. The only section I didn’t throw away (it was terrible!) was that fragment (‘From an Unfinished Poem’) about the idea of an event being horizontal and the personality vertical.

HN: Was that connected with Plath’s poem that begins ‘I am Vertical/ But I would rather be horizontal’?

AS: No, I didn’t then know Plath’s poem, but even my bad poem had nothing to do with longing for death. I was trying to work out, though, some sort of guideline for belief, and I suppose I came to the conclusion that most of us long for confirmation of our own importance. The question then arose, who are we, or who am I? There seemed to be no proveable answer; only a further question: am I the self I think of as being ‘me’, or am I the person other people know and recognize as Anne? The poem — a fragment that wrote itself very quickly one morning — says we’re all of us both, so long as we’re living. Once dead, we become our writings, or the fragmented memories of those who knew us; necessarily simplified by the ‘stories’ of our lives. The story we leave behind us, in other words, is never quite the one we told ourselves (or wrote) as we went along. Interpreted by others it becomes a ‘fiction’, a flattened version of three-dimensional, on-going experience. The cross here is made of a living personality bisected by a flattened reputation.

But don’t get me wrong. I believe most people live in stories ... myths, religions, fantasies, the very stuff of literature. And rather than reject such fictions, I think we should rush to embrace them so long as we understand they have no substance whatsoever ‘out there’ beyond human consciousness. The universe is indifferent to us, there is no afterlife except for versions of us that are remembered and celebrated on earth. Fictions, then, are all we inherit of heaven and hell, a ‘cemetery’ full of vertical stories that commemorate everything we humans, as a thriving species, have thought and done — good and evil, constructive and destructive.

HN: So the symbol of the cross isn't always a Christian symbol for you?

AS: By no means. Think of the many ways in which we use the word 'cross', or 'crux', or 'crucial' in ordinary conversation. Quite outside the Christian context, we talk about being crossed in love; or we cross the street or cross a river (or cross the Rubicon when we make an irrevocable decision). Gibbets and markets have traditionally been set up at crossroads; Oedipus killed his father at a crossroads. When we're discontent or fed up we're 'cross'. I think I ended 'Making Poetry' with the lines 'One of those haunted, undefendable, unpoetic/crosses we have to find' not only because it suggests bearing one's cross, or bearing one's fate patiently, but because if one's life isn't 'crossed' at some point, that is, if nothing ever happens to challenge you — if you never undergo some psychological or physical ordeal that tests you to the utmost, then you're likely to become unsympathetic to the failings of others. An uncrossed person is a shallow person, a figure without a shadow. I can't think of a single crossless poet, for example.

HN: In one of the e-mail letters you sent me recently you said that if you had been writing 'Other Poetry' today, you might have used a house as a symbol, rather than a cross. Houses are all over your poems, too. And over the years you've lived in many more houses than most people, haven't you? You've lived in New England, California, Chicago, Michigan, Cambridge Massachusetts, Cambridge England, London, Belfast, Dundee, Grimsby — to name only a few places. Even now you move between two houses: one in Durham, the other in North Wales. Can you write poetry anywhere, or does place have a psychological as well as topological significance for you?

AS: I certainly have done a lot of moving around: not my choice, just what happened. But I can more or less write anywhere. As Kit Wright said to me the other day, most poets love geography. I'm no exception. I've always enjoyed the challenge of getting to know new places. My husband is an amateur geographer and historian, and we share a love of empty landscapes. We live in Durham and Wales because we are nourished by the countryside around us, rocks and rough weather notwithstanding. On the other hand, most of my poems are rooted in my life, and in my experience of music and art, and of course, in my frustrated temperament. I never settled completely into one belief, or one way of life, but a pleasant, grandmotherly way of life has overtaken me at last, so I don't suppose I'll write very much more about myself. Other people are far more interesting, and I enjoy working out my own versions of their fictions.