

PHILIP HOBSBAUM IN CONVERSATION

PHILIP HOBSBAUM was born in London on 29 June, 1932, and raised in North and West Yorkshire. Educated at Downing College, Cambridge, under F. R. Leavis, and at Sheffield University under William Empson, he was famously the initiator of several notable writing groups, in London, Belfast, and Glasgow, whose attendees included poets such as Peter Redgrove, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Liz Lochhead, and novelists such as James Kelman and Alasdair Gray. From 1966-1985 he was successively Lecturer and Reader in, and from 1985-1997 Professor of, English Literature at Glasgow University, and was instrumental in beginning the M.A. in Creative Writing there. A widely respected critic, whose books include studies of Robert Lowell, D. H. Lawrence, and Wordsworth, he is also, as Jay Parini elsewhere in this issue points out, a rather neglected poet. His four published collections are *The Place's Fault* (1964), *In Retreat* (1966), *Coming Out Fighting* (1969) and *Women and Animals* (1972). This interview took place in Philip Hobsbaum's living room in Glasgow on 9 May, 2002.

Gerry Cambridge: *Rather like Ted Hughes, you went to Cambridge from Yorkshire. You studied under F. R. Leavis. Can you tell me a bit about your time at Cambridge? Did you find it a culture shock?*

Philip Hobsbaum: Only in a negative sense. We weren't all daft in West Yorkshire, you know! I had two years working as a temporary clerk in the Ministry of National Insurance as it was then, before I went to Cambridge, because I failed my physical examination for National Service, thank goodness. But I couldn't go up to Cambridge immediately, so filled in my time as a clerk, and spent a lot of time acting, and debating, and writing. I wrote 2000 poems in that period, and 7 plays and 20 short stories, and some of those short stories I used for later poems. I used to sneak into lectures at Leeds University, and I heard people like Harold Orton, Professor of English Language who taught us all to regard dialect as a language and not as a degradation of language: and the greatest lecturer I ever heard, G. Wilson Knight and, though virtually forgotten now, I think like Leavis one of the greatest critics, a real big Romantic in the tradition of Coleridge. Wilson Knight was a kind of ideal academic for me. Well, when I went to Cambridge, I went to every lecture in my first two weeks, and I was appalled; most of the lecturers were reading out of their own books — each one of them had published at least one book — so they read out their books, and they were extremely boring, some were inept, and there was the odd characteristic that almost a third of the lecturers were called Bennett. There was

Joan Bennett, and H.S. Bennett, brother of the far more famous Bennett, Harold; neither of these lecturers were any good.

But you also had F. R. Leavis as a teacher. You've called him possibly the greatest man you've ever met. Why?

Well of course you're dealing with a very high level; in other moods I might say Hugh MacDiarmid. They had a lot in common, even though MacDiarmid was a drinker and Leavis wasn't. They were both highly combative. They could start an argument in a cemetery. Also they both had a mental energy I've met in very few other people. They each had a very high estimation of each other. Leavis always saw that MacDiarmid was reviewed favourably in his magazine *Scrutiny*, and MacDiarmid said to me "wonderful what that man can do on half a glass of water!" They had met at the Edinburgh Festival. They were both physically quite small and slight, but they radiated energy, they radiated dynamism.

What was the significance of Leavis as a critic?

Attention to the text. And great attention to the linguistic properties of the text, the way words interact. And also a kind of moral stand. People often said that Leavis is vague politically; that shows they don't know politics. The key to a lot of Leavis's thinking is in the introduction to his edition of the two essays by John Stuart Mill on Bentham and Coleridge. He there comes out very strongly as an old radical liberal; a left wing liberal, not a socialist; and John Stuart Mill was in many ways his mentor. Mill is very sane; a lot of what we take for granted was started by Mill, such as feminism, and by his partner Harriet Taylor.

You began your first writer's group at Cambridge?

It began as a verse speaking group. The standard of verse speaking was abominable. I and a couple of friends of mine put an ad in the University newspaper, *Varsity*, and an interesting bunch of people turned up, including Peter Redgrove. Very soon people began bringing their poems along. But we never lost the sense of the importance of the speaking of verse. But what actually distinguished the group from anything else was that, acting on an idea in fact from one of my teachers, H. A. Mason, I devoted each session to a single writer. It didn't have to be poetry; it could be stories, a scene from a play, or an excerpt from a novel. And I typed these out on a sheet, which was distributed before the meeting. Those who were present got next week's sheet; those that

weren't there got it posted to them, so everyone knew what was coming up, and everyone had a chance to read the work beforehand. Because they had the sheet in front of them, this meant intense and directed attention, again you see very much a Leavisite thing.

After that you went to Sheffield?

There was a four year gap, when I was a teacher in London, and I went to Sheffield in 1959.

You started another group in London, to which people like Peter Porter came along?

Yes, but it wasn't quite so simple as "coming along". One heard about people. I had a friend who mentioned this clever young man called Peter Porter, so I said, well, bring him along and Porter took to the group like the proverbial duck to water. His work was very obscure in those days, very congested, and when you're in a room with people with nothing against you, who just can't understand what you're writing about, this rather energises you to reform your technique.

And you went to Sheffield specifically because Empson was there?

You wouldn't go there for the landscape or the weather. And had he been in Timbuctoo I'd have gone. In those days I was getting very interested in literary theory. You couldn't discuss theory with Leavis; he'd dismiss any such approach by saying, "I'm not a philosopher," and that ended that. I wanted a major critic with philosophical interests and at that time — 1959 — the person was Empson, whose work I greatly admired; I suppose somewhat perversely, while studying under Leavis at Downing, I was reading, taking apart, catechising, Empson's first book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which was written when he was about the same age as I was, 22. It had started as essays for his tutor and supervisor, I. A. Richards.

What was Empson like to meet in person?

He was a character. And he worked on it. A lot of it was a kind of act. He was immensely funny, immensely witty, very irreverent, and had this kind of upper-class Winchester voice, an English aristocratic voice, though he always described himself as a Yorkshireman. He went to Cambridge to read

mathematics; now Richards was a great Svengali figure, a great dominator, and he said, No, no, you must read English Literature, so Empson got a First in mathematics and then went over to English, where he got a starred First. He talked very fast, was at times very hard to understand, had a mind wide-ranging in every direction you can think of — he was a really exciting person. He was also a very good supervisor; you'd send him a draft, quite a massive draft sometimes, it would come back by return of post; I always left very wide margins, so he could scribble — abuse, very often: "Here you are at your pedant's jabber again", was one friendly remark I remember, but always subjoined, "Let's meet on Wednesday at one-thirty." We'd often go and have a drink in the pub afterwards.

Was he still active as a poet at that point?

No. I started a University magazine, which I called *Poetry from Sheffield*, Sheffield being about the most unpoetic place imaginable so I thought there was a kind of paradox there. Getting a poem out of Empson would have been an event. But he used to say to me, "No, poetry's a young man's game, you write poems when you're young, and you can go on and write poems when you're elderly. It's like taking a bath. Young men need baths, and old men needs baths, but middle aged men don't need baths and that's why they don't write poetry!"

His poetic silence was very marked, wasn't it?

But you know, I had a student who was deafened by the RUC in an interrogation, and when he was my student he said, "You do realise that every poet stops at thirty-three?" I said, "name several"; well, he named people like Tennyson and Arnold. "Tennyson went on—" "It wasn't any good," he said. I said, "I'm 33, are you saying I should stop now?" "No, no," he said, "keep your name before the public." But when you look at the valuable poems, they mostly are written by young people. There are poets who have written well into old age, but these are rareties, among them some really great artists.

Yes, it's not hard to think of numerous exceptions: Hardy, Edwin Morgan, to name just two. When did you start writing your own poems?

I'd written when I was at school, to the great contempt and contumely of everybody, from my father to my schoolmates. I wrote a vast amount when I was in Bradford being a clerk: I think that's probably the ideal thing to be if you're a writer, a job which gives you a kind of basic living but doesn't take too

much toll on your faculties. The worst thing is teaching, not because teaching is uncreative, but because it's so creative, it can sap up your writing. But when I got to Cambridge the atmosphere was very cold and discouraging, not true of Leavis, but from my fellow students, who appeared to believe that if you couldn't write something like *King Lear* by next Tuesday, you'd better not try. So I wrote a very minatory poem, called 'A Minor Poet to His Muse', which actually was signalling the end of verse writing.

Is the formal study of literature in a University negative from the point of view of the creative impulse?

That was my personal experience. And of course Leavis was not devoting himself to teaching creative writing. Creative writing should be not a separate department, as happens in several American universities, but part of the English department, and students should be taught not just how to read, and how to write critical essays, but how to write. People say, well, it can't be done, but it's done in music all the time. Seamus Heaney makes the most valuable distinction between craft and technique. Craft I can teach, you can teach, anyone can teach; I can show you how to write a sonnet, a one act play, and so on, but what I can't show you is how to be a good writer. Heaney defines being a good writer as your orientation to the Universe, finding out who you are; now this can come in independently, for example, when I described the group to a friend I made in Sheffield who was a Freudian psychiatrist, he said, "What you have there is the essence of group therapy." And so I think it was. The thing that's always left out in discussing these matters is the intimate interchange between people in the group, and the alliances that take place.

Was your own work dealt with in the context of the group?

I wasn't writing poetry then. I stopped writing verse in 1952, and began again under Empson. I found him very stimulating. He didn't encourage me to write verse but I began writing verse when I went to Sheffield in 1959, and I began with a series of imitations, of Yeats and Eliot and indeed Empson, which I never put in a book called 'Lines for An Assistant Lecturer,' with a refrain "*A don must edit Milton till he dies.*" I recognised then there were certain elements in the University which could kill you, but my main concern was to write a Ph.D thesis.

You've published four books of poetry, between 1964 and 1972, roughly at two year intervals. You haven't published any verse since that. What accounts for

that silence?

Oh, University. Remember that my first concern was not to be a poet but to rectify a number of what I regard as false ideas concerning literature. The thesis started very early on, when I was arguing with my schoolmates: what makes a book good or a book bad? Is there such a thing as value? Why do critics disagree? My thesis, which took me nine years to complete, was concerned with that, and the poetry came back incidentally. But it wasn't my first concern and the muse is inexorable. It has to be your first concern. I remember once having a row with Anthony Burgess — a man to have a row with — and I'm afraid I used pretty low tactics, he was drunk at the time and so was I. He more or less burst into tears and said, "Well you're a poet, I would love to be a poet, being a novelist is second best." He told me at the time that all those poems in *Inside Mr Enderby* were his juvenilia. That was the only way he had of getting them published.

Do you feel your poetry has been passed over to an extent?

Yes, they haven't read it. The trouble in Britain is you're typecast. I'm typecast as an academic, and I knew the writing was on the wall when my former pupil Marcella Evaristi arranged a gigantic poetry festival in Edinburgh and I wasn't in it. No malice from Marcella; she just didn't regard me as a poet. Of course I've done a lot of it myself because I've written seven or eight prose books since then, some of them of gigantic extent, and most of them have been taken a good deal of notice of. It's the academic thing, you cannot do everything at once; you teach — and Empson was a superb teacher, very idiosyncratic but, then, I think most great teachers are; you write criticism as Arnold and Empson did; but you can't do everything. I didn't put poetry first because when I stopped writing verse at Cambridge really I got involved in criticism. That carried on for years, and I went to Empson to do this Ph.D.

It seems to me that writing criticism, compared to writing one's own work, is a less vulnerable enterprise, because you're basing criticism upon previously existing texts.

Ah, but you bring a lot of your own to it. For example, I've been reading a lot of T.F. Powys, a great and underestimated and somewhat neglected novelist and story writer. Leavis put Powys among the four best story writers in the English language; that's talking very big, and I think he's right. I was working on Powys, and one of the interesting things about him is his adoption of a baby

when he was an elderly man. My understanding of how he felt about her, and how he related to her, and why he stopped writing, is very much involved in my own experience as a grandfather. He was actually asked in a newspaper interview why he'd stopped — this was only a couple of years after the girl was adopted. He said, "I'd rather spend my time teaching my little girl to read and write", which he did. You bring to bear your experience. Dr Leavis used to say: the real requirement of being a critic is experience of literature and experience of life; and he put down the ineffectuality of most of his colleagues at Cambridge to the fact that they weren't family people. A lot of them were more or less disengaged gays, you see, whereas Leavis and his wife raised three children; there were problems, family problems, and this is all part of life, and you have to bring this experience to bear. Take a very copious critic like George Saintsbury. I can't help feeling there's some human element missing in Saintsbury, much as I respect him. Experience of life, you see. I thought I knew about university students, until I acquired two stepdaughters; my word, this is really an eye-opener, you hear them talking with their friends, you see what their priorities are.

T.S. Eliot was once asked what his critical method was, and he said "The only method is to be very intelligent." What's yours?

Listen to the text. Watch out for the text. Listen very carefully to what the author is saying. The other critical method is: assume every book is no good until it proves itself otherwise. I've never publicly voiced that, but I do a lot of reviewing and so forth. This copies life: nearly everything is bad. When you're tuned into badness and something good comes along, very often as I say in *Theory of Communication*, what happens is you will get very hostile, in other words it has penetrated through to you. A number of writers I began by disliking very much, and you think: *well, why is this happening, why this antagonism of mine?* It's because they're altering your insight, they're working on your psyche, as any great writer does. Even if you look at the whole world of literature, people saw mountains differently before Wordsworth from what they did after; now, I'm not suggesting that Wordsworth invented mountains, he probably picked up a trait of the time. In 1814, George Darley, a minor poet of that time, published a poem about the phoenix, and there is that line, and Dr Leavis again pointed this out to me, "The mountainless green wilds among." No one in 1774 would have written like that, they never expected mountains, but after Wordsworth you expected mountains. If there weren't any it was a point to make.

I think everyone's had that experience of reading a writer with a powerful vision who's significant to them, and afterwards looking up even quite quickly from a page and seeing the world in a different way. There are some poets that do that to you, but it tends to be the poets who have a more extreme vision, such as Wordsworth. I don't find that with a poet such as Edward Thomas, for example. His vision doesn't impose itself upon you, because it's so subtle. Someone like Wordsworth, someone like Lawrence, these poets have got a very definite vision, they're not poets of what Hardy would call "impressions", as Hardy talked of his own verse. Who were your own influences as a poet?

The first poem I woke up to when I was about 14 was Whitman's "I wish I could go and live with animals". Then "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Whitman was the first poet I woke up to. The first poem I wrote was an imitation of Spenser, in which I'm in distinguished company with Keats and Pope. It was very boring. I tried all sorts of things. Of course the *Faber Book of Modern Verse* came into my trajectory, and there in the Michael Roberts' edited version I found Wallace Stevens. I had this craving to read Wallace Stevens, and you could not, just after the war, get hold of American books. I got hold of Oscar Williams' little *Treasury of Modern Verse*; I've owned three copies of that, really worn them out; they've got a lot of junk in them, but there are things like Elizabeth Bishop's 'Roosters': what a poem. Took me years to realise that was an attack on the male sex. There's this marvellous poignant passage in it about Christ forgiving Peter for betraying him; it's agonisingly poignant. She's such a superb poet, but Stevens was my man really, you know. He went into my head and twiddled my brains about.

Your own work is resolutely formal, in general.

You can't imagine what it was like when I was young. You opened a magazine and the poems in it you couldn't understand; you thought: *I'm just an ignorant grammar school boy in Bradford, how can I possibly understand this great work by George Barker?* The great work by George Barker is technically flawed and is a bunch of rubbish anyway.

What was behind your own poetry, which to anyone who's read it is lucid and solidly founded in actuality?

Well, a lot of that was Philip Larkin, and my own early reading of Hardy and Wilfred Owen. I'd written an article called "What's wrong with Cambridge poetry?" which appeared in the University newspaper, *Varsity*, in 1954, and I

was summoned to the august presence of Thom Gunn, who had graduated, but who was still around. I visited him in his hotel room where he was writing a review for the *London Magazine*. He said to me, “If you don’t like all these poets, who do you like?” I told him James Kirkup, with whom I’m in correspondence, though I’ve never actually met him face to face, and D. J. Enright: this made a lot of sense, believe me, in 1954. “Technically inadequate,” pronounced Thom Gunn, and thrusting towards me a manuscript he said, “Have you heard of Philip Larkin?” Well in common with nearly everyone who read great poetry, I had not. But I looked at this — which had been copied out either by Thom Gunn or John Wain — and this was what I’d been looking for; that’s why every one of my four books has an epigraph from Larkin. This was plot, scene, circumstance. Now I don’t regard Larkin really as a great poet — I think he wrote one great poem, “Church Going.” He is like a lot of poets, he writes verse at a very high level, like Matthew Arnold, whose great poem is “Dover Beach,” like Thomas Gray, whose great poem is the *Elegy*; I’m not saying the rest of their verse is discountable, it’s very good indeed But I think that “Church Going” is one of the great poems of our time, really. And Larkin’s was a kind of new approach — it reopened the door to Hardy and Edward Thomas, whose work I knew, but it wasn’t all that conscious as an influence on my part. Sometimes poets write better than they know. Empson and I quarrelled over intentionalism. Intentionalism is trying to understand the text by surmising or conjecturing the intentions of the writer. I don’t believe that can lead you anywhere. My best known poem is ‘The Place’s Fault’; that was written as a verse exercise to see if I could still write pentameters. What it did was unearth something I’d suppressed, the years of persecution in a village in North Yorkshire, on the coast, when I was evacuated. I’d no idea I was going to do that.

Where did that persecution come from?

Well this is a key theme, and I’m going to renew it, because I am planning another book of verse. Now, I regard myself as English, but I have no English blood; my ancestors on both sides are Polish Jews; I love the English language, my grandparents on my mother’s side could not speak English, my mother’s first language was Yiddish, my people on my father’s side are much more Anglicised; my grandfather was born here, in London, my father was born in Salford, my great grandfather, from whom I derive this extraordinary name Hobsbaum, which is unique, was a German speaking Pole who had arrived in England about 1870. The name itself is really Obstbaum, which means “fruit tree.” So I’ve got double vision. I never lose a sense of myself as a foreigner,

as an alien, as a person genetically Polish-Jewish; the Jews aren't a race, so I'm a kind of subordinate form of Polish or Russian; my mother was a Russian citizen until she married my father, in 1929. So it's a matter of identification, as Freud would say. I identify with England, I feel myself a countryman of George Herbert and Edward Thomas, albeit they were of course Welsh in origin; England's history is my history even though, when Elizabeth was on the throne, my people were being kicked about somewhere in Lithuania or Latvia. It's all a kind of double vision. Also, wherever I've been, I've been identified as something else. My father left London because of the anti-semitism; that was in the 1930s; my greeting to Belle Vue grammar school in Bradford was a big boy coming up to me as I was going up the stairs, saying, "Who killed Christ?" and punching me in the solar plexus; in Belfast, of course, I was an honorary unionist and Englishman until they discovered my sympathies were totally and inexorably Republican, when they would say, [Ulster accent] "I'm ashamed of you!" and a friend would say, "But he's a Jew", and they would say "My own brother-in-law was a Jew, but you wouldn't hear him saying the likes o' that!" But it was because the Jews in Belfast identified with the Unionists, as the Jews in India identified with the Raj. So wherever I've been I've been an outsider. In Scotland I'm accused of being English; in London I was attacked for being Jewish, even when I was quite grown up. I don't belong anywhere.

Your last book was published in 1972, 30 years ago. How do you feel about that work at this point?

It's written by a young man called Philip Hobsbaum. I know much more now, I'm much wiser, but I'm not so silly as to want to alter the poems. Because a young chap in his early 30s would resent a septuagenarian coming and saying "Oh my god, you can't publish that."

Like John Crowe Ransom, who rewrote his poems — awfully.

Auden, Graves, they revised — Wordsworth — they revised feverishly. Better to write another poem on the same theme.

Do you find writing criticism creative?

Yes. An example: I've *dreamt* criticism in my time. I remember dreaming about 'The Ruined Cottage,' by Wordsworth, and I actually solved a problem; you see the first draft of 'The Ruined Cottage' is missing, thought destroyed by damp, and I've reconstructed that, I think. It all comes from a circumstance I'd

noted, of a transcript Dorothy made of an original draft of a letter which Coleridge sent to a man called Estlin; Wordsworth talks to the pedlar, and the pedlar calls him “stranger”; now, that implies in the first draft that Wordsworth and the pedlar didn’t know each other; by the time the second draft is there we have a kind of plot line regarding the earlier life of the pedlar, and it intersects the narrative and with successive revisions this intersection grew, so it splits the poem which goes from the basic story of Margaret and the ruined cottage, to the Pedlar and his story, which is much less interesting. At one point Wordsworth himself separated the two. The important point is this: I dreamt the solution that Wordsworth did not know the stranger and I stopped my research work of that period and devoted three months to writing an essay about Wordsworth. It appears in this edition of Wordsworth I did, published by Longmans in 1989. Now that is a creative kind of criticism; you’re actually — exploring really, so I think the best thing I’ve done in criticism is a reconstruction of the first draft of ‘The Ruined Cottage’ which is a very great poem indeed. I could never have written anything like that, never.

Can criticism be regarded as literature in its own right?

It certainly can. Indeed that’s how it survives. Nearly all criticism dies, and the content of a lot of what survives you wouldn’t agree with. Now, undoubtedly one of the greatest critics in English is Dr. Johnson and you read his *Life of Milton*, it’s a wonderful work; but could you agree that ‘Lycidas’ is harsh and discordant? — the verse of ‘Lycidas’ is among the most musical in the language. Then again, Matthew Arnold: when Arnold writes of Gray, very movingly, “He never spoke out”, and you read that essay by Arnold about Gray, it’s about Arnold. Gray, a born poet, fell upon an age of prose: well, that’s how Arnold felt about Victorian England, and Gray was writing a hundred and more years before. There are a lot of your own creative problems involved in criticism. But I want you to notice something: the really great critics of the past, Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, they’re all in some sense poets manqué: the grit got into their gearbox, and I think that that is what produced the criticism. Something impeded their poetry, but if you look at their criticism, you’ll find that it’s written with an extraordinary power, and this is true, too, of T. S. Eliot. I really don’t think he’s a critic of the order of Coleridge or Arnold, but there’s no doubt about it that individual essays, like the essay on Hamlet, which I don’t agree with, or the essay on Marvell, which I think is a wonderful piece of work, are written with a kind of life and energy that you don’t find in most prose. I can’t say Eliot’s a great critic because his central texts seem so faulty, especially ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in which he says that the greater the

individual artist, the more separate are the man who suffers and the man who creates, to which I say: hooey! And hooey again! He was trying to safeguard *The Waste Land*, which is so personal.

Of course he did say that poetry is not an indulgence in emotions but an escape from emotions, and that only someone who had emotions knew what it was to want to escape from them.

Hooey! He's pretending his emotions don't go into his poetry. Take 'Burnt Norton'. This is a poem of a childless man who wishes he had children; it's based on Rudyard Kipling's story 'They'. He and his long-term girlfriend are walking in the ruins of a manor called Burnt Norton which was burnt down by a maniac who had driven his wife and children out, brought in his mistress, had children by her, and burnt the house down. And notice it's full of children, children in the leaves. He took a lot of it from Kipling's 'They'.

As a poet who is also an academic, you've said academe mistrusts you for your poetry, and poets mistrust you for your academic background. Could you comment on that?

When I went for an interview for Liverpool University I was asked "Does writing poetry get in the way of pursuing your research?" The person who asked me that was himself a failed, a former poet; but it's not the research, it's the teaching. I've come to the bitter conclusion in my old age that teaching is the great intruder upon creativity. If you do teach, you must ration it very severely, whereas I always was an all out, full blast teacher, no holds spared. As Dr. Leavis was before me; I saw Leavis three times a week, he wasn't paid, he didn't have to do this.

A situation like that you talk about in Liverpool is hinted at by a poem in your second book called "Interview with the Professor." Your poetry often seems to me to have ambiguous attitudes towards the academy.

No, not ambiguous. We have to make it. We have to make creative writing stage centre. I've recommended that throughout my career. Criticism is part of it, I'm not saying don't write criticism, but I am saying, don't only write criticism, because, you see, writing creatively teaches you respect.

The situation in America is that every small college has its creative writing tutors. I wonder how much good that's done for American poetry.

I think it has produced a lot of very good American poets. I'm sure of it. Now, I'm not saying they can create good poets, nobody can do that, but I am saying they can give their students a sense of verse. The great thing in teaching creative writing is encouraging them to read, a two way process. I think there are flocks of good American poets, many of them young women.

Who?

Well, some of them aren't so young. We had a writing fellow here, Cleopatra Mathis, who's written several good books of poetry and is herself part of creative writing courses. Your own friend Charu Suri with whom I correspond all the time, is a product of Princeton. She studied with Toni Morrison; that's an astonishing thing to happen to you, really. But I'll think you'll find people like Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, are restricted, they don't teach all out as Eddie Morgan and I did; we never said, "we won't teach the ordinary class because we are poets." I was fifteen years Eddie Morgan's colleague and I never knew him cut a corner on anything, he never pulled rank, never pulled prestige, one of many reasons why I respect him; he was a first rate academic. Eddie's secret I think is that he could go home at weekends as it were, he could cut it off; perhaps I never managed to cut it off sufficiently. Were I to rewrite my life I think I would certainly do much less teaching. There again, fame is the spur: I was ambitious, I wanted to rise in my profession. The real problem is I didn't separate different areas: for me, writing of any kind, teaching, research and administration were all part of the same thing. I was interested in all of them. So in some ways I had a lovely life; as you rightly say there's been a kind of hiatus, but only as regards verse, the criticism goes on. I never stop writing criticism, because it's very important. I feel there's a time and a season in everything: I feel the next book of poems coming on. I only would say to younger people, watch out for the teaching because the students will take from you anything you have and ask for more; they'll drain you dry.

What advice would you give to a young poet? Would you advise a young poet now to take English Literature at a university?

Yes, but choose your teacher. Try to find out who is teaching where. Or if you come across somebody whose work you like, see if you can work under them. My first wife Hannah was a great admirer of G. Wilson Knight, and she tried for Oxford when she was at school and wouldn't go anywhere else, even though her head teacher, who was a Durham graduate, got her into Durham. So I said to Hannah, why didn't you go to Leeds, where Wilson Knight taught, and she

said she thought he was dead. You see, people don't think in these terms; they think in terms of where their father went, or is there a pleasant party scene ... they don't think in terms of who is teaching there, which is the important thing. Or they assume, as happened at Hull, that Philip Larkin was teaching there: but Larkin didn't talk to students, he was a librarian. So I would say of course read whatever you want to read, but if it's English Literature, work out who's teaching there. I mean, Aonghas MacNeacail came to Glasgow because Edwin Morgan and I were teaching here. That made quite a lot of sense, but he was a mature student. Nobody does this. But more seriously, about your career, especially if you're a poet, poetry must take the front seat; get a mundane job; work in a bookshop, work as a junior civil servant, as a librarian, something which is reasonable and doesn't take too much out of you. Now I've given this advice for years, and no one takes it. They want to go into everything at once, into publishing, broadcasting, television: you can't do everything. For myself, though, it's a plasm: teaching, and writing poetry, and being a critic, and doing research, they all went on; at one time poetry might be predominant, another time research might be; at different junctures of your life, one thing will take over from another. Remember, my main motivation was not to be a great poet, it was to try to clear up an area of literary theory: hence, *Tradition and Experiment*, and to make sense of the history of English poetry. At the moment I'm going into a different gear, I have a little granddaughter, I feel old age creeping on, and I feel I do know a bit about life. My next book is called *North Kelvin*, after this very agreeable district where I live. The epigraph comes from Stevens: "Death is the mother of beauty." I don't think I've got ten more years, I may have five, probably less; but I'll tell you this, a feeling that the tumbril is approaching makes one very well aware of one's immediate whereabouts. Also, my friends die. I'm losing friends and acquaintances at the rate of roughly one every three weeks. I'm not exaggerating, some are very serious bereavements, others are bits of one's life going west, but I'm going to too many funerals. At the same time I've got a little granddaughter, who's a kind of spark of life, an extension of one's being. I'd like to get across some sense of the sheer beauty of this earth which I'm going to leave before too long. I'd like to write about my dead friends, but in such a way as to show that death is the mother of beauty; I'd like to link them up with trees, quite frankly: I love trees, I'm fascinated by trees. I don't know enough: I've just bought a book about trees. If I can I'd like to write elegies which aren't just elegies, but celebrations. What I'm waiting for is the rhythm. Graves put this beautifully in *The Common Asphodel*: as a poet you're waiting out for the rhythm, it's the rhythm that makes it, the rhythm that determines the poem. Often you put words in which you're not going to keep, they're counters for the words you're going to have.

What do you think about contemporary University courses in English?

I don't like them because they are ideologically situated; in other words, they deal with themes such as writing and place, writing and time, writing and ideology. I don't think in those terms.

Anthony Hecht in a terrific recent interview with Philip Hoy talked about this increasing tendency in the academy and intimated he was glad to be no longer teaching.

You work through the interstices. I've taught a lot of authors who wouldn't be on any conceivable syllabus, by working through the interstices. There are always these holes in any syllabus. But basically I agree with Empson. He said to me that his aim in designing a syllabus was to get all the major classics in, and there are a great many of those. What worries me about younger academics now is the amazing holes in their reading. One man whom I shan't name but who is one of the greatest scholars alive had never read Philip Massinger's play, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. That's a key Jacobean drama. Rosemary [PH's wife] is not an academic, yet she knows it. Nowadays it goes much more into specialism: so you're interested in French gay film, and that means you don't read Wordsworth. I find that horrifying!

So you still believe in a central canon?

I do. But I think it's up for negotiation, and I think there shall always be loopholes and areas where you can smuggle authors in.

What would be your central canon among the poets from Chaucer on?

Gawain and the Green Knight, Piers Plowman, Canterbury Tales, 'Troilus and Criseyde', then there'd be a bit of a gap, but I would take in the poems in Tottle's Miscellany, especially Thomas Wyatt, and among the big Elizabethan poets, Fulke Greville, a much neglected, very important poet; obviously Donne, who's as much an Elizabethan as a metaphysical. The great neglected figure apart from Fulke Greville is Chapman, whose *Odyssey* I think is one of the greatest poems in the language, but it's not in print, it's inaccessible. A lot of what's in the syllabus is determined by what the students can get hold of. But obviously, Spenser, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Donne, George Herbert, and also the seventeenth century Marvell, a most important, crucial poet; Marvell wasn't taken seriously until the 1920s: astounding! Eliot really brought

Marvell into stage centre. Then after Marvell, Dryden and Pope; Samuel Johnson's 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' I can go on, but you get an idea. The Romantics — I dislike the term Romanticism. I mean, is it a period? In which case it should include Jane Austen and George Crabbe; if it's not a period, it should include Marlowe and Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, and so forth. It's a very much messed about word, Romanticism. Also the really great people like Wordsworth are so big, no container will contain them. Wordsworth was a Romantic and a dozen other things besides. He was a great narrative poet, the best since Chaucer; a great realist, a great allegorist, indeed one of the people of whom I think: *how can anyone be so great?* But it's interesting: had he died in 1805, instead of 1850, we'd have had most of the essential Wordsworth, even with a poet of that stature.

George Mackay Brown used to say to me that when Wordsworth turned 35 someone should have shot him. (Laughter.)

Well, you know my respect for Mackay Brown. I'll go to my grave saying this: his story collections *A Calendar of Love* and *A Time to Keep* are two of the best books I've ever read! I've read them, studied them, taught them. He's a very good poet, and I still remember Seamus Heaney coming in with face bright with joy saying he'd bought this marvellous book *The Year of the Whale*, and he was right. He's a great writer, I've got no qualifications about that. I was privileged to be with him in a contest judging university poetry. You know, it seems amazing, because Mackay Brown's background and mine could not be more different, and we agreed to such an extent people thought it was fixed.

That is interesting, because as far as I remember George had little time for academics, the world of the academy. Yet you seem to bridge both those cultures, both the creative side and the academic side.

Anything George said about literature, I listened to very attentively, put it that way. He didn't write it down as formal criticism — he could have done, the brain was there, remember his higher degree was on Gerard Manley Hopkins at Edinburgh. I think he was a great writer in many different forms, and everything he wrote I attend to with great interest. Interesting to do all this living in Orkney. T. F. Powys was very similar, you see. You can be a recluse but look deeply into human nature. Ezra Pound said that at the bottom every community was the same: because we're all animals!

Anyone with experience of any of the island communities in Orkney, say, would feel they were microcosms of humanity, except it's much easier to discern that microcosm than it would be in a city. Which was Wordsworth's idea, of course: that the country environment meant that the actual fundamentals of life were much easier to witness.

Empson's second book was called *Some Versions of Pastoral*, and he defines pastoral as a way of taking away a lot of social minutiae and looking at the essential interplay of human beings.

Speaking about "the essential interplay of human beings", can we talk a little about the Glasgow group? Anne Stevenson, who had experience of it, has said that you had a gift for focusing upon what individual writers actual talents were, and encouraging them in that direction.

It's a branch of criticism. That's what you do.

And it was by invitation?

It's all by invitation. That is a very important difference. I was very lucky in my evening class in Glasgow, because James Kelman and Liz Lochhead were in the first ruck of people coming. I mean, really, you know, these are two major talents, and Jeff Torrington came in the year after. I do think of all the groups I've run that the Glasgow group was the best. For one thing, we had never made much headway in prose fiction, but in the Glasgow group: Alasdair Gray and Jim Kelman! I regard these as two of the most prodigious talents in fiction. I'm amazed: they're both friendly with each other, they both live in Glasgow, and they're so different. George MacBeth said to me critically once, "All your geese are swans." I said, "Well, it's just the reverse of reviewing and criticism: when it comes to books, treat the book as no good, until it proves itself otherwise. With students, assume they're good: let them prove they aren't."

Have the people you've acted as advocate for been outsiders, like yourself?

It's writers are outsiders. When you're perfectly integrated, and happy with your life, you won't write. I'm a Freudian: writing is the grain of sand in the oyster.

What's your impression of contemporary British poetry?

The young women have taken over! Most of the interesting verse of the last 15 or 20 years has been done by young women, and I think the figure remotely behind them is Adrienne Rich. But they're taking in areas of subject matter no man has touched. There's a poem by Kate Clanchy, who is one of my favourites — I knew her when she was a toddler, you know, I haven't seen her since — called 'Poem for a Man with no Sense of Smell.' Show me the man who could write a poem about that. It's all olfactory, it's all the way things smell, entirely composed of smells. She's good. She may be a one book girl. Her book *Slatern* is pure gold. I'm glad I didn't review it; it would have been hyperbole, but I've taken dozens of copies round the world: to America, to Korea, and given them away.

Why, if women are coming into their own in poetry, is it so?

Because they've been liberated. Adrienne Rich liberated them.

Not Plath?

She's marginal compared with Rich. Even Plath was scared of Rich, the way Shakespeare was scared of Chapman. Oh, you look at Plath's letters and journals: she recognised the gigantic talent. There are many poems, but the two crucial ones I think are 'Twenty One Love poems,' which are answers to Shakespeare's sonnets — my God, you have to be very big to talk to Shakespeare's sonnets, and Adrienne Rich does it and she brings it off. And they're lesbian love poems. Tell me who before Rich published lesbian love poems? She opened it all up! And then her lover died, and there's a poem which brings tears to my eyes, 'A Woman dead in her Forties'; it is there along with 'Lycidas', and 'Adonais', and Gray's 'Elegy': these really great elegies. There are a lot of really good young-ish women poets.

Are there no really good young-ish male poets?

They're not really breaking new territory, like the women. The ones that really obtrude themselves into my consciousness are young women.

You yourself of course have said in chapter 6 of A Theory of Communication, that new work which is extremely original is very likely to be dismissed by the critics.

Look at Ian Hamilton. He propagated Michael Fried and Colin Falck. He deprecated Peter Redgrove. He was a good journalist, had a slashing technique with cross-heads, had a good turn of phrase, but he was a lazy reader. One thing you have to be as a critic is widely read. Now, quite apart from his third at Oxford, which can mean much or little, after all Auden got a third at Oxford ...

This business of a third at Oxford — how important is that in judging poetry?

It's symptomatic; as I say, Auden got a third at Oxford, and I knew why, because I knew the daughter of the man who was instrumental in him getting it. A third is not exactly a recommendation. After all Larkin got a first at Oxford.

George Campbell Hay, the Gaelic poet and brilliant linguist, got a third at Oxford if I remember correctly, simply because his linguistic interests had moved on from what was being taught on the course.

The point is, I'm not saying that it's significant in itself, *per se*, but be very careful; Edwin Morgan got a first, Norman MacCaig got a first

What did Wordsworth get?

... you take it in context. I got an upper second. I wasn't working for a first. I never thought I'd be an academic. I've trained endless people to get firsts. I knew the score, but I was very perverse, I would never read any book I was recommended; I read lots of books otherwise.

The final chapter of your book, Essentials of Literary Criticism, quotes with approval extracts from essays by Leavis, G. Wilson Knight, and D. H. Lawrence, but implies that if students ever actually write like that they'll never pass an exam ...

Well, not quite ...

More or less, and that it can backfire badly. So, what does that say about genuine creativity as opposed to what is expected of one in academe?

I see your subtext. This is all anti-academy! [Laughter.] I'm the first to say the academy must be reformed, and we must make many more concessions to creativity; for example, I don't see why we have a film studies department, unless they're making films. All sorts of people came along to my group in

Glasgow, not just students. Alasdair Gray I met in Glasgow in a pub when I was drunk; I have no recollection of this encounter. Alasdair says that he was talking — who else would talk about this — about Sir Philip Sidney and rhetoric, in the Rubaiyat [a Glasgow pub]; apparently, I turned round and said to him, “Your discourse is so interesting one would pay money to hear it.” I next met him two years later, when Aonghas MacNeacail was being a caretaker in a house on the Clyde, and suddenly the door burst open, and here was this wee man with a moustache and a pyramid of beer cans, who tripped over the rug and shouted “Fuck!” as all these beer cans dispersed in three dimensions all round the room. That was my first remembered encounter with Alasdair Gray in 1970, since when we’ve been very close friends.

What’s your take on contemporary Scottish poetry?

Booming! Wonderful!

How would you class yourself?

Not, for one, in Hugh MacDiarmid’s class. But I do wish, before people would pass judgement on my poems, that they would read my books. I don’t ask them to like my work, but I do ask them to read it. I look to the future. I’ve got two books in mind, one called *North Kelvin* ; I’ve a very clear conception of what the poems will be about, and I’m listening out for the rhythm. How few years have I got? I shall die without a moan, but after you’re dead you won’t know that you’re dead ... but it’s such a wonderful experience being alive. I’m absolutely an atheist; I don’t think there’s any rhyme or reason in the Universe; I don’t think it means anything. I have done what I could do. How I could have done more I don’t know. I’ve worked a seven day week, ten hours a day, most of my life. I’ve encouraged those whom I could encourage; made enemies — well that’s up to them.

Have you made enemies deliberately?

Of course not! Who does?

I think some do: MacDiarmid, for instance.

Yes, he was fractious. I think there’s something in my manner or prose style that gets some people on the raw, but it’s certainly not something I deliberately do.

Could it be something to do with the air you give of certainty in your criticism? Tom Leonard for instance is extremely tentative about criticism; he has an uncertainty, or perhaps a mistrust, about the whole critical 'enterprise'; whereas I don't think you do in that way.

I certainly don't.

You're very forthright and straightforward ...

Ah, but before I'm forthright there's a lot of ratiocination, study and thought goes into it, so I may seem dogmatic but there's a great hinterland of worry and worry and thinking ...

Is there an element of your having tried to take over the centre because you're an outsider?

[Long pause.] There is a craft of criticism: a set of techniques. It can be studied and learned. If you're an idiot or an ignoramus, you won't be very good at it. If you're reasonably intelligent and interested in people, as well as literature, you might be very good, and I've sought to be a really good critic. When I look at the bumbling, stumbling efforts of many of my coevals, I feel they're maladroit. They haven't learnt their craft.

What do you think of contemporary critical theory in the academy?

Most of it's woeful! I do understand the sentiments of those outside the academy who attack it. I can only say it's not all like that; but too much of it is. Such critics haven't learned their craft, and I'm so upset by the holes in the knowledge of the younger academics, who are such specialists. That's the difficulty, you cannot be a specialist and be a critic. I do think you should master the basic works of English literature. I know one chap who's brilliant; he's read hardly any 19th century novels. What's worrying is he shows hardly any signs of being about to. I've left him the complete works of Dickens in my will.