

## *Interview*

Peter Didsbury was born in Fleetwood, Lancashire, in 1946, and moved to Hull aged six. He is the author of *The Butchers of Hull* (1982), *The Classical Farm* (1987), *That Old-Time Religion* (1994), and *Scenes from a Long Sleep: New and Collected Poems* (2003), all published by Bloodaxe. David Wheatley walked a short distance down the road to interview him in his home on 25 October 2003.

*Andrew Duncan has wondered on your behalf why you were “so much later than [your] contemporaries in starting, when access to print was easier in the Sixties than at any time before or since”. “Why did [you] publish [your] first book at the age of 36”, he goes on, “and why did [you] evolve so much out of touch with [your] real contemporaries, although [your] eventual technique is so easy to relate to the major poets of the sixties?” And then: “I believe, from an informant, that the answer is that Didsbury was only reading the ‘mainstream’ poets, and it took him a very long time to work out that they were uninteresting; he wrote poems in this style, which he has now thrown away”. True or false?*

It’s false. False spelt “bollocks”. I don’t know of any informant who would be qualified to tell him that, anyway. I started writing in the ’60s, just before I left school, and a couple of poems from my undergraduate days survive in the first collection. I certainly wasn’t reading “mainstream” poets to the exclusion of anything else, or even very much. I was reading, for example, Jacques Prévert and Christopher Middleton—not people you’d describe as mainstream English poets. So I didn’t have anything like that to discard. I still have all the poems from those years and I can assure you that their faults, which are many, aren’t of the kind which come from imitation of the mainstream. And where does Duncan get the idea that publication was easier in the ’60s? Easier if you were happy with cyclostyled trash, perhaps.

*I know that your and Sean O'Brien's poetic beginnings were closely conjoined. How deep does that go? I've always thought there's a vein of Didsbury in O'Brien, maybe especially in The Indoor Park (for which you took the cover photograph, after all). Is there an O'Brien vein in Didsbury?*

Sean and I clearly were very closely involved. In fact, we first met at a creative writing workshop. Poetry was the most important thing. We enjoyed "planning an assault on the citadel of English verse" together—that's in heavy quote marks, denoting irony... One thing we had in common is that we took the tradition seriously, wanted to be part of it, and didn't see anything wrong with ambition. There must have been all kinds of mutual influence, we've been friends a long time. There's a shared humour, for one thing, a humour of place to some extent. I can't really comment on what there might be in my verse that would remind other people of Sean's—that's for them to say.

*What do you think, at this safe distance, of the whole Bête Noire/Hull poets thing? Was it a help or a hindrance to you?*

You have to separate the two strands. The Hull poets "thing" was really related to the publication of Douglas Dunn's anthology *A Rumoured City*. It was inevitable that some people would try to construct an analogy with Liverpool. The truth is that we were an accidental grouping of poets who happened to come together here for a very brief period at the end of the '70s and beginning of the '80s. Nearly all of us had left Hull by the time the anthology was published. Except me. One of my hippier friends used to refer to Hull as a "karma octopus". The main thing to say about the *Bête Noire* years is that they were enormously enjoyable. They have an almost mythic status now, and one still isn't quite sure how John Osborne accomplished the whole thing. The readings were something to look forward to every month in the season—very large audiences listening to a startling selection of poetry. I got the chance to hear, and read with, some amazing people: Bob Creeley, Paul Durcan, Carol Ann Duffy. Ashbery reading in the Newland Park Hotel on a May evening. Miroslav Holub came two or three times. A very exciting period. How it affected my reputation, I'm not entirely sure. The polemic in *Bête Noire* magazine was very much postmodernist, and I've said before that I don't think this is the best way of looking at my work.

*And wasn't Ed Dorn here too? And Lowell a bit before that?*

I believe so, though not in connection with *Bête Noire*. I used to be quite a Dorn fan in the mid '70s. Some of the English staff at the school where I then taught were given to attempting long monologues in American accents and cowboy personæ. This would have been some years before *Bête Noire*. And yes, Robert Lowell came too. I believe he looked at the river Humber, which had a paddle steamer ferry then, and reputedly said, "My God, it's like the Mississippi". Where he was standing the river is about a mile wide.

*For a writer living in Hull there must be few more idiotically predictable questions than "What does Philip Larkin mean to you?" (Pause.) What does Philip Larkin mean to you?*

Philip Larkin means the same range of things to me as he does to most other people of my generation who read poetry. It's nothing to do with being in Hull. Having said this, there was a whole class of people in Hull—aspiring poets, other interested parties—who would gleefully report Larkin "sightings" to one another. If he'd been seen walking down one of the local avenues, if he came off campus... Apart from that he was the same public person to react to as if I'd been living in Doncaster or Hounslow. But the important thing if you're a young poet in a place like Hull, with a poet like Larkin writing there, is that you're aware you've got permission to write. There's no temptation to think you can't write poetry here because you're provincial. Reviewers these days still seem to be obsessed with the fact that one comes from Hull and that poetry can be written here.

*You're literally a footnote to Larkin's work, of course. Something about "sodding nonsense", Selected Letters, footnote to p. 702.*

I'd reviewed some critical book for *Poetry Review*, and wasn't particularly taken with it. However, I thought it really came alive at one point where the author took Larkin to task for his imperial attitudes, and said so. Larkin evidently took exception to this and wrote to Amis asking had he seen this "sodding nonsense". That's my claim to fame.

*Any opinions on the post-Selected Letters, post-biography controversies? People still get very worked up about all that, don't they?*

Well, one always knew that Larkin was a right-winger. Some of the revelations are shocking in detail, like the songs about sending the “niggers” back home, but I think you just have to accept that he was a man of his class and generation. With a father like his, City Treasurer of Coventry in the 1920s, it’s perhaps no surprise. Sad, but there it is. This isn’t to condone anything in his attitudes, very far from it. He lived long enough to have learned better.

*Moving on to your poetry, at last: “The Experts”, in The Butchers of Hull, features “a man who thinks he’s a Roman”. With so much Roman archaeology in your poems, I’ve often wondered if you do too.*

But I wasn’t an archaeologist when I wrote that poem! I suppose there are half a dozen or so poems which refer to the Roman world, but for very various reasons. In that one I was trying to evoke a vanished, rural, very local and mythic England, and ways of sharing it. The man who thinks he’s a Roman is simply a typical antiquary. He’s like Larkin’s chap who knows about rood-lofts. John Aubrey meets one of William Cobbett’s labourers. No, I don’t think I’m a Roman at all! I told a fellow archaeologist once that a lot of my poetry was about inventing an imaginary archaeology, to which he said, “Oh, you mean lying”. That was quite an unusual response, actually. There’s a surprising number of serious poetry readers in the profession.

*“Strange Ubiquitous History” talks a lot about “our fathers” and the myths and histories they pass down. But when I think of your work alongside that of Hughes or Hill, there’s an essential difference, I think. I don’t get the same sense of investment in the blood-and-thunder, chthonic Englishness of that venerable pair. Is that fair comment?*

To a large extent. I’m probably much more grimly amused by the whole thing than they would be. Wary of its deceptions. I’m someone who’s constitutionally fascinated by myth and the weight of the past, but we know now where some of those roads lead. I think something like “The Drainage” is atavistic enough for anyone. It certainly frightened me when I wrote it. The poem you mention isn’t one that’s been particularly important to me but I suppose it points to some of these things.

*On the subject of myth, you say of your “mythological characters” in “The*

*Summer Courts” that “they continually failed me” while “In Britain” calls the people’s stories “reasons for killing each other”. What is it about myth and “the people” that brings out this reaction in you?*

I think in the first poem the awareness is simply that people can very easily fool themselves with the mythological, while with the second... I’d just been reading the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, and had a very clear synthetic vision of a kind of early-medieval past drawing on all the constituent heroic literatures of these islands. It was at the height of the Northern Irish Troubles too. The involvement of story and song in political violence.

*To come back to Hughes, do you think a writer who burrows down so deep into these atavistic forces is at risk of colluding with this mythic violence?*

Well, poetry’s a dangerous business. But so are a lot of things worth doing. I’m not sure it’s about the danger of collusion so much as making sure you can deal with what you uncover. I’ve just spoken about frightening myself when I wrote something like “The Drainage”. Where Hughes stood in relation to all this, how near the edge he went, I’m not in a position to say. Just to be anecdotal for a moment... when I heard Ted Hughes read in Hull for the first time, in the 1970s, his voice was startling. It seemed to be coming out of the grave mouth. Other people who were present have remembered this, too. There was a kind of dark power to it.

*If it did frighten you, were you conscious of wanting to draw back, or did you ever think of jumping over the edge?*

No, but it’s very strange to find out after several very intense hours or days to realise that your imagination has been telling you to write a poem about cutting animals up. The fear diminished as I examined what had been produced, what I’d been dealing with. The way we’ve been “thrown” into a world which depends on physical violence. I can look at it objectively now, but when I do it occasionally at readings I find it can still empower my voice—it can still have a disturbing effect on the audience.

*There are other poetic Englands than Ted Hughes’s to choose from, though. Your “Back of the House” begins “Sick of England, but happy in your garden”. Like that other Hull poet Andrew Marvell, you seem fond of a*

*green thought in a (back garden) green shade. Is the suburban pastoral mode one that's appealed to you?*

It's a darker place than Marvell's garden. The poem mentions Marvell, but in relation to public burning, an attendant possibility in his day. And there's an awareness of the relatively recent massive violence of the 1943 blitz. The actual garden belonged to a house in which Sean had a flat at the time. So the poem mirrors parts of the conversation and imaginings of that particular afternoon. I share the belief that "the garden" is a very proper place for the human being to inhabit, a boundary location between culture and nature, the wild and the sown. In this poem, it's an enclosed place where I can safely indulge in some indolent imaginative speculations about Englishness and then step away from them. I suppose there are quite a few poems set in my own urban back gardens. One very prosaic reason for this is that for much of my life I never had enough money to be anywhere else. Going back to my vision of historical England for a moment... I'm very aware that it was once a Catholic country, and talk about this in a couple of poems. I'm quite interested in myths of place, and in finding ways of evoking it. There's a poem in the new volume called "The Green Boy", in which some kind of nature figure surfaces from one of the old Hull docks at an unspecified point in the past. Like several of my poems, it came from a very visual mental image which demanded to be pursued. In this case, over many years. One recent reviewer called it mediæval, but to me it takes place in the early eighteenth century. It's the old thing of writing the poem to find out what you know rather than starting with what you know and writing the poem around it; that's important.

*For me, that sense of writing out of what you don't know gets reflected in the style of The Butchers of Hull, which employs a very stop-start delivery that's far from placid and pastoral. What about all those verbless sentences in a poem like "The Flowers of Finland"—what was that about?*

"The Flowers of Finland" is one of those few published poems which were written in my Ashbery phase, if you like to call it that. The poems by Ashbery which first appealed to me were very short ones, and I foolishly spent a couple of years trying to write longer pieces in this loose, flowing New York verse. The telegraphese at the beginning of "The Flowers of Finland" was just a way of starting the imagination off, and in this case it sur-

vived into the poem. Like putting the car into first gear. You don't stay in it very long, but you need it to get you started. Or when you start walking, those short steps that get you into your stride.

*Maybe related to that is "Saying Goodbye", in which you say "The problem is how to address yourself", or "The Smart Chair", where you talk about not recognising your own voice. There's a disaffection with the first-person I in your poems, isn't there, as it's deployed in more conventionally realist writing?*

Well, I would have thought there's a fairly normal ratio between first-person and third-person narratives in my work. I suppose I speak through quite a wide range of personæ, but this just seems natural to me. I never had any interest in finding a first-person confessional voice.

*The elliptical first-person isn't the only difficulty, though. I used to puzzle over the "Bearshit barrow elbow HIM/ATE hash arm EYE him" passage in "The Rain" until Steve Burt pointed out to me that in fact it's Hebrew, a transliteration of the opening of Genesis. Kindly explain yourself. And according to "That Old-Time Religion" shouldn't God be speaking Sumerian, not Hebrew?*

It's a poem in which I was simply having linguistic fun. The subtitle and dedication provide the key to it: "Text and Exposition of a Northern Creation Fragment, for Neil Astley". Bloodaxe was still quite a young press when I wrote it, and there was still an awareness around of its self-proclaimed "northern" dimension. The whole Viking/*Briggflatts* thing. So I thought Neil might enjoy this spoof commentary on a spoof creation myth purporting to come from an ancient Nordic literature. There's a lot of jokes in the poem about linguistic textual analysis, sound changes in Hull working-class dialects etc. The general underlying form will be familiar to anyone who has learned Anglo-Saxon from *Sweet's Primer*, say. And some of the jokes simply come from the opportunities afforded by misspelling. More Nigel Molesworth than James Joyce. The Hebrew you mention is an almost transliteration of the first verse of Genesis. I read Hebrew at university.

*Speaking of religion, I notice that William Wootten in the Guardian objected to your claiming to have "a 'religious' nature". He wanted to know what those quotation marks were doing round "religious".*

He seemed perplexed about whether my claim to have discovered some kind of religious sensibility in myself was an elaborate joke, or whether it was real. Well, it's not something I would joke about. He asked what kind of a religion it is that goes around in quote marks. I would have thought the answer to that is perfectly obvious: it's a normal use of quotation marks, saying "religion" isn't the best or most appropriate word, but it's better than using that awful word "spirituality". I don't see any problem there. Or perhaps he wants to know precisely where I stand in the theological "realism/non-realism" debate. To which I could only answer that it's usually nearer to the ex-Bishop of Durham than to any Archbishop of Canterbury. I don't take the Christian myth as history or cosmogony which is accurate/true in ways which are only appropriate to other kinds of discourse. But it still compels me to attend to it and, I hope, act accordingly. Beyond this, I think one ought to be reticent. Self-delusion is too easy. "If you find the Buddha, kill him!"

*There's a strong whiff of Anglo-Catholicism in some poems, isn't there? Have you ever been tempted, in Roy Fisher's words, "to commit Ash Wednesday"?*

I committed Ash Wednesday a long time ago. I attend, with varying degrees of regularity, a church which for want of a better phrase is Anglo-Catholic. I'm all for smells and bells in the interests of helping one stand before the unknown. It isn't part of a larger package, though, as it was for Eliot. I'm neither a Royalist nor a Conservative.

*But then there's a heavily pagan dimension too. Perhaps Fisher's "polytheism without gods"?*

Wootton says there are plenty of pagan deities in my poems, but I haven't counted them up. Some appear simply as props, like Anubis in "At North Villa". In other cases, perhaps I'm just happy to personify some of those powers I find knocking round in the world.

*As in "Eikon Basilike". Is the Eikon Basilike figure in that poem the real hidden god of your work? And who is he anyway?*

There's a seventeenth-century work called *Eikon Basilike*. It pres-



ents itself as meditations by Charles I, but authorship was later claimed by some Cambridge divine. It was published around the time of his execution. The last line of the poem is the rest of the expanded “long title” of the work. It aroused such sympathy for Charles that Milton was instructed to write an official counterblast to it.

*And more than the historical figure, is he the genius loci too, the spirit of place?*

He only comes in towards the end. The important figure in the poem is Cowper, for whose soul the poem declares itself to have been written. Or rather Cowper’s three pet hares, who take me on this odyssey through the frozen city. I’ve always felt rather a kinship with poor, mad Cowper, who believed all his life that he was damned. I must tell you of a rather odd incident which attaches to this poem. I read in Vaasa, in Finland, a couple of years ago. I was walking back to my hotel after some official function, through the snow-covered midnight streets, with the Swedish-language poet Ralf Andtbacka, who’s translated a lot of my work, including “Eikon Basilike”. He was trying to persuade me to include it in my reading the next day, and I was resisting this on the grounds of its length and difficulty. At which point a large hare appeared in the deserted street in front of us and sat and watched us approach. Ralf said he’d never seen a hare in the city centre before. I ended up reading the poem.

*There are some poems in The Classical Farm I’ve read over and over again without coming any closer to understanding. “Glimpsed Among Trees”, for instance. But then when someone asked you to read it at your book launch the other week you said you couldn’t remember why you’d written it. Are there poems of yours that confuse even you?*

Yes, a few. In this case, it’s to do with what I mentioned earlier, about writing to find out what you know at any particular point. It doesn’t follow that you pay the same amount of attention to all of them after they’re written. I hadn’t read that poem in public in the twenty years since I’d written it, which meant I didn’t have a technique for reading it. Afterwards I tried to construct the remarks I should have made to ease the audience into it and I realised I did know what it was about: it was about the past of that

street where I used to live, going back to when it was farmland, it was about an awareness of the river and the fog, and the nearness of the estuary. I could have said all kinds of simple things, but was too startled by the request to get them out.

*On the subject of critical responses to your work, let me read you a short passage from "The Hailstone": "A woman sheltering inside the shop/ had a frightened dog/ which she didn't want us to touch./ It had something to do with class,/ and the ownership". John Osborne comments: "In the twenty-first century an astute reader might deduce the entire Thatcher era from these five lines". And David Kennedy: "The image of the woman with the dog as an apprehension of political order can also be related to postmodernism in general". Postmodern and political: what was it about that dog?*

It was nothing about the dog, it was the woman. Her class neurosis was almost tangible. The other people involved in the poem, passers-by, my wife and myself, were quite joyous, as English people often are when it's raining: it was a joyous summer downpour, we'd been running through the rain, feeling quite high, and I expected this woman to somehow share in the exuberance and joy I was feeling at the time, but she was so neurotically class-ridden. It's quite natural to me to pet other people's dogs in shops, to approach them through their animals, but she was terrified of this act. I think John's comment is very valid. It seems to me to speak of the whole last century, rather than just that specific period, but the poem was written in Thatcher's Britain and that was a place where a lot of these attitudes were accentuated. She was very frightened of something, anyway.

*Something else people get very frightened of is postmodernism. You're adamant you're not a postmodernist though, despite what Bête Noire used to say? Roy Fisher, to mention him again, goes all jittery when the p-word gets bandied around and calls himself a "submodernist" instead.*

No, not postmodernist. I share those jitters. I've never really understood the term, at least in the sense of knowing why it's particularly necessary. I didn't understand all the hype about it when it became fashionable in the late '70s. But I don't move in academic literary circles. I wrote something for the PBS a few years ago saying I objected to the term in relation to myself, since on a

very simple level I don't think I do anything in my work that Lawrence Sterne, for example, hadn't done before. Or is he a postmodernist too?

*"A Letter to an Editor" hints at difficulties with getting your third book written. Do you find your inspiration comes and goes? You took even longer (nine years) with book four.*

It's a simple fact about the way I write. There are very ordinary reasons which contribute to that, pressures of earning a living at different points in my life. Some quite prosaic reasons, too: *The Classical Farm* was finished and accepted two years after the first book, but Bloodaxe was still struggling to survive at that point and it was eventually five years before it came out. I just kept adding poems, which is why it's quite a long collection. It was dispiriting though, and I lost some momentum. Nothing mysterious about it: Larkin's muse went, and there are times when I've thought mine has gone completely. I've often wished I was writing more, but a book takes as long as it takes. I don't set out to write books, I wait until I've got enough to put between the covers.

*Various critics have pointed to a break in your style between your first two books and That Old-Time Religion, and the first few reviews of Scenes from a Long Sleep have aligned its new section very much with That Old-Time Religion. Do your four books fall so neatly into two halves?*

Not quite. I think the major fault line runs through *The Classical Farm*. Because of the practical publication problems I've just mentioned, it contained quite a few pieces that would otherwise have been in the third volume. I was very aware of this when I was proof-reading the *Collected*. The first few reviews of the *Collected* seem to disagree entirely about the value of the different books and where they see the divide coming. People always make simple but erroneous assumptions, such as that the latest poems to be published were the latest to have been written. It's not always the case, especially given the way I write: some poems might be on the stocks for several years until I get them the way I want them. The earliest poem in *The Butchers of Hull* was written in 1967. A couple of poems from *A Natural History* might easily have been placed in *That Old-Time Religion*. And so on.

*But you do complicate the chronology by reversing the order in the Collected, putting the new work at the beginning and the old work at the end. Why is that?*

I simply agreed to a suggestion by my publisher, Neil Astley, who said he thought it would be appropriately archæological to have the most recent work at the top and the older work at the bottom. One reviewer has said it's an irritating contemporary habit to publish things in this order, but I don't mind either way, frankly.

*There's a vein of almost sitcom comedy that's new to That Old-Time Religion, in a poem like "An Office Memo", as well as the more Shandyeian whimsy of "The Devil on Holiday", "A Malediction" and the title poem. Is humour important to you?*

Yes, humour's important, but I'm not always aware when I start writing a poem if it'll have a humorous dimension or not. "An Office Memo" is just an occasional whimsy, a fact which seemed to distress some reviewers. If I reveal that it was originally typed out as a memo and passed around my colleagues at work then I'll probably sink even further in their esteem. The humour is deliberate in a poem like "He Loves to Go A-Wandering", where I'm really quite interested in characters who are seriously mistaken about what's going on, like this 1950s mountaineering anorak character who believes he's telling time through a telescope. And also the poem about the bear who thinks he's becoming a sofa in some kind of terminal apotheosis at the moment of death. As it transpires, the poem says, he's utterly wrong.

*Would your poem about arctic explorers come under the same heading, their heroic but pointless endeavours?*

That poem's called "Events at the Poles". It took its shape from a doodle I did while I was sitting trying to write one night. I found myself drawing a globe on the paper with a kind of chimneyed shack at each pole. I wanted to know what was going on in them and the characters' stories developed from there.

*How would you introduce the themes of your new collection, A Natural History (in Scenes from Long Sleep)?*

Any discussion of themes is a kind of retrospective exercise. I

don't think I'm sufficiently used to it as a collection yet to know quite what's going on. Probably it's revealed to a certain extent in the choice of the epigraphs, particularly the one from Swedenborg. Also in the belatedly chosen title. I think we should celebrate ourselves, everything to do with us, much more as part of a unified natural whole. My friends' dreams, mentioned in the title poem, are as much a part of a natural history as the swifts in the summer sky. We restrict the term to the animal and plant world now. Gilbert White or Richard Jefferies knew better.

*I notice you write about slavery in "Coasts of Africa 1850", and your friend the poet Mahdi Majid Saleh's "forbidden country" in "Kurdistan". Is your interest in migrations, exiles and refugees something to do with living in a port city like this?*

I don't think so. It's got a lot to do with what I felt when I was brought here as a child, that I'd been wrenched from my proper home. The first of the poems you mention was occasioned by my excitement at inheriting the documents and medals of a naval ancestor who was involved in arresting illegal slavers in the Atlantic in the 1840s. I've been down to the PRO and seen the log books of the vessels he served on. Curt accounts of arresting leaky Portuguese slavers and liberating twenty-five slaves from the hold. I did a lot of research on the slave trade when I was looking into his life. The poem is one result. Kurdistan, again, is a very personal thing. Mahdi is a very fine Kurdish poet who's over here as an asylum seeker, that awful phrase. He was sent to live next door to us, and Pat and I and he have become close friends. The poem's a personal response to our friendship and his plight, which is severe. Here's a man who's been imprisoned and tortured for refusing to keep silent, and for speaking out on behalf of women's rights, amongst other things. And yet the British Government, to its shame, doesn't want to know. If we can't do something about it, it will ultimately try to return him to Iraq. It should be proud to afford him asylum here.

*Another new poem is called "Not the Noise of the World", but instead of it aspiring to religion it ends up describing "the silence of which/ all liturgies are afraid". How is the tug of war between the secular and the transcendent working out for you at the moment, do you think?*

I'm trying to sit light to it. Let me speak anecdotally, again. The

poem was written in response to a request from the Salisbury Literature Festival. Each poet was invited to write a poem for a particular location. Mine was one of a group to be placed in the cathedral. At the time I wrote it I was exploring Unitarianism. I've still got a great affection for the Unitarians, but they're excessively wordy. All kinds of denominations will invite you to partake of silence during a religious service, a silence which normally lasts around three seconds before the minister hurries on. That's where the poem's coming from.

*As a pluviophile (your word) you tend to see sermons in raindrops rather than stones. In "Common Property" someone even bears raindrops on a bucket telling him in Morse code to "go and eat his mother". What have they have been saying to you lately?*

Not a great deal at all. It's been a very dry summer.

*I think they're saying, "Peter Didsbury, write another book and don't take nine years about it". On an unrelated subject there are a few short prose poems in your first book, but it's not a form you've revisited for a while. Why not?*

When I was younger I was aware of the prose poem as a form, and felt it was something available that I ought to try. I think it worked for me in a poem like "A White Wine for Max Ernst" but I just don't seem to have thought about it using it since.

*Are there any contemporaries for whom you feel a special affinity? John Ash, Peter Reading, Allen Fisher, Iain Sinclair... (you'll have to help me out here)?*

The contemporary poet who undoubtedly had the greatest influence on me when I started out was Christopher Middleton. More recently, I don't know. I have to confess that I don't read a great deal of poetry any more, at least not in the sense of keeping up with what's being published. I've had it suggested to me that I ought to be ashamed of this, or that I'm affecting some kind of exclusivity. In fact, it's just a practical consequence of the ways my life has worked out.

*What does British poetry most need now?*

In light of what I've just said, there's little point trying to answer that.

*Finally, since you talk about the difficulties of removing dog hairs in one of those prose poems I mentioned earlier, "A Vernacular Tale", and since I notice you now own three cats, I was wondering—have you tried sellotape? It works a treat on jackets and trousers.*

Sounds like an invitation to sellotape my cats' mouths together. They've a habit of sleeping on the beds, and you find yourself sneezing in the middle of the night. [*Sneezes.*] But that's the snuff.