

Meeting a Poet

Interview by Charles-Henri Discry

Tony Curtis is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Cardegan (Wales) but first and foremost a poet. War figures prominently in both his academic work and his poetry. He visited the University of Liège in March to give a lecture on Wales and the Great War and read some of his recent poems. I asked him a few questions around a cup of tea...

As a poet, what do you think of David Jones's poetry and engravings: a culmination of perception, or the sad illustration of ravages of war?

David Jones is very interesting because of all the WW1 writers, he seems to be the most positive about it. I'm not saying he's actually enjoyed the war, but he enjoyed more aspects of the war than for example Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, or Edward Thomas.

It is obvious that he felt a great camaraderie, he loved being with the other men. I don't think it's a homoerotic thing. David Jones liked to be part of the army. He was a private soldier but of course, he was an intellectual, a self-taught intellectual. What he saw is that the only way to make sense out of the horrors of the WWI was to see it as part of a continuum of wars from the time of the Romans onward.

I think that he is a very difficult writer. As I said, he was an autodidact, and perhaps partly as a consequence he weaves English with quotations in Welsh, quotations in Latin; he knew very obscure things about the Roman Wars, previous British campaigns and so on. So, as a reader you need notes, you need help because his references are so wide. So, *In Parenthesis* is a difficult book and that's why it is not widely read, it's really a book that is used in universities. It's not for the general public. The frontispiece drawing is one of the most striking images of the First World War with a British Tommy like a half undressed figure of crucified Christ.

David Jones wasn't desperate to get out of the army or to get out of the war, which most people were, of course. He was quite taken by the idea of being a soldier. I never met David Jones, but one of my friends did and in his later years, he lived in a flat in Northern London, which he called his bunker, then in a room in a nursing home. He was agoraphobic, so he very rarely went out; he very rarely went to literary or artistic occasions. He was very much in his trench, in his bunker, in his flat.

So the war was the most defining thing about him. It was on the Western front that he glimpsed a Roman Catholic Mass through a chink in the wall of a barn. Although he did not convert straight away, within five or six years he'd become a Catholic. It's such a profound experience seeing, in the horror of the Western front, this moment of spirituality, of the mass and of the fact that you could celebrate mass anywhere. If you have a priest, all you need is bread and wine. It was a life-changing moment for him.

You can say that the most important thing that happened to him is to become a Catholic, but he wouldn't have become a Catholic without his war experience. So, yes, war was the most important thing for David Jones.

He made the best of his time in the army, seeing that sometimes you have to go to war. It's such a terrible thing, but sometimes you have to do it. That has always been true for the whole of Western civilization, so you can't understand Western civilization without taking war into account.

Why did you choose to write about such a bleak subject?

Because it's the most terribly important thing that human beings do. It has to be talked and written about so that we can learn from those tragedies. The war also brought my mother, who is also Welsh but lived in England, back to Wales. My father was injured before D-Day. He was repairing vehicles for the army, she was in what we call the land army, and they met. So, I'm here because of Adolph Hitler!

What is your favourite place to compose poems?

Anywhere. I write on planes, trains. You write poems in your head. If you just write about yourself how boring it would be! It's much more interesting to write poetry that is fiction. Of course, I write about myself and my family, but not only about this. I don't want to write about politics. There are some wonderful stories about wars. I also write poems about the beauty of part of Wales.

What are the sensations you explore while composing? Are there any 'keys' to your poetry?

Listen to the poem in your head, look at its shape and let your imagination work.

In 1994 you became Professor of Poetry at the University of Glamorgan. Did this change anything to your way of writing? Did you explore new forms, see things differently?

No. You don't need to have so many forms. I sometimes write poems with no rhyming patterns, or that are not intended to have any. I actually like the rhymes to come naturally. But, I also write some poems as villanelles, which is a very rigorous form.

What would be your advice to young people who would like to become poets?

Just write. Don't worry about readers. Try to publish those pieces you feel almost satisfied with, even if in just a students' magazine.



Recent poems by Tony Curtis

Two war poems, a very personal view of Liège, and a poem that includes a private experience, the scattering of his father's ashes, all the more poignant when we know that his mother died shortly after his visit in Liège.

SHILLINGS AND PENCE

South of Mametz on the Fricourt road
shrapnel felled his frantic horse
and the toppled gun carriage snapped his arm
then ground him in the mud.

Hours later they found him,
taken for a corpse, 'til one eye
blinked open to the lightening sky.

Weeks with the white nuns; then
the long journey back to Ystrad Mynach,
with his working arm stuck out absurdly
in splints above his bandaged head: this Blighty
gift given before his seventeenth birthday.

Three long days from Albert to home:
the khaki-crammed platforms,
songs and moans and steam and waiting,
a succession of dusty carriages and platitudes.

When in his mother's parlour she helped him out
of that coarse uniform, it weighed a ton:
tunic, trouser pockets, kit-bag filled with coins -
the King's shillings, the people's pennies
slipped quietly to the boy while he'd stood or slept
by the men and women he'd travelled with.

That evening before the hearth, her fire coaxing
the numbing cold from out of him,
he saw the flickering future and slept the night
awkwardly, there in his father's chair.

SHILLINGS ET PENNIES

*Au sud de Mametz sur la route de Fricourt
un shrapnel abattit son cheval affolé
et le train du canon renversé lui brisa le bras
puis le broya dans la boue.*

*Des heures plus tard ils le trouvèrent,
le crurent mort, jusqu'à ce qu'un oeil
cille au ciel pâlisant.*

*Des semaines avec les soeurs en blanc ; puis
le long voyage de retour à Ystrad Mynach,
son bras entier dépassant absurdement
dans sa gouttière par dessus sa tête bandée : cadeau
de démobilisation avant son dix-septième anniversaire.*

*Trois longues journées d'Albert à chez lui :
les quais bondés de khaki,
chansons et plainte et vapeur et attente,
une succession de wagons poussiéreux et de platitudes.*

*Quand dans la belle pièce sa mère l'aida à retirer
son uniforme rêche, il pesait une tonne :
poches de tunique, de pantalon, kit-bag pleins de monnaie –
shillings du Roi, pennies du peuple
glissés discrètement au gamin debout ou endormi
par les voyageurs qu'il avait côtoyés.*

*Ce soir-là devant le foyer, le feu attirant
de ses membres le froid engourdissant,
il vit l'avenir et dormit toute la nuit
mal à l'aise, là dans le fauteuil de son père.*



A FLEMISH LANDSCAPE

This mid-March snow
surprised the low lands
with its sort shroud
thrown over dark green and bare trees.

The unseasonable deaths
of birds and insects.

Pelted by snow
the ditched backseat of a car
is draped with icy ermine,
where a buttery girl
and her hunter
could be enthroned.

A clutter of crows
lifts from the copse
into the blank canvas.

PAYSAGE FLAMAND

*La neige de la mi-mars
a surpris le plat pays
de son espèce de linceul
jeté sur les arbres vert sombre et nus.*

*Morts prématurées
d'oiseaux et d'insectes.*

*Criblé de neige
le siège arrière abandonné
est drapé d'hermine glacée
où une fille de cuisine
et son chasseur
pourraient trouver un trône.*

*Un vol de corneilles
surgit du bosquet
vers la toile vide.*

LYDSTEP HEADLAND

I start with the visible and am startled by the visible – Dan-
nie Abse

This balmy evening on the Headland
it is enough to be startled by the visible:
behind me six Welsh Blacks snuffling at what grass
they can find between the clumps of gorse.

An August moon three-quarters silver
set above the south horizon that is rusty-rose,
magenta and grey in layers
holding the charcoal smudge of Lundy Island.

The Headland's sloping cliff edge falls sheer from my feet.
This is where I scattered my father.
The sea is a wide, flat lake stirred only by currents
and the surface creases of a fitful breeze.

Then one, two, three birds
which rise from nothing -
black-backed gulls that soar and dip
for fish only they can see.

I know that Somerset and Devon,
lights and lives, are over the southern edge;
and to the west sailing for days
nothing until America.

In the fragile focus of my field glasses
that tightening O-O of sharpened vision,
the black tipped span of the gull becomes immense:
my Pembrokeshire albatross.

LE PROMONTOIRE DE LYDSTEP

*Je commence par le visible et suis surpris par le visible –
Dannie Abse*

*Par cette douce soirée sur le Promontoire
il suffit d'être surpris par le visible :
derrière moi six Welsh Blacks reniflant l'herbe
qu'elles dénichent entre les touffes d'ajoncs*

*Une lune d'août aux trois-quarts argent
se couche au sud sur un horizon en strates
rose-rouille, magenta et gris
qui enserme la tache de braise de l'île de Lundy.*

*La falaise du Promontoire tombe à pic à mes pieds.
C'est ici que j'ai dispersé mon père.
La mer est un grand lac uni animé seulement de courants
et les rides en surface d'une brise capricieuse.*

*Puis un, deux, trois oiseaux
qui s'élèvent de nulle part –
mouettes à dos noir qui planent et piquent
sur des poissons qu'elles sont seules à voir.*

*Je sais qu'au-delà du bord sud il y a
le Somerset et le Devon, des lumières et des vies ;
et à l'ouest des jours de mer
sans rien avant l'Amérique.*

*Au foyer fragile de mes jumelles,
cet O-O concentrant une vision aiguisée,
l'envergure à pointes noires de la mouette est immense :
mon albatros du Pembrokeshire.*

MORNING ON THE MEUSE

The hotel begins to empty
and the suits are on the river bank with their mobiles
looking for a signal.

The broad barges that work the river
push with, or shunt against, the flow
of the spring-swollen Meuse,
both green and brown through the day,
steady, full and wide, a river road
from the Ardennes that has cut past Verdun
and on to the North Sea.

Downstream there are herons,
cormorants, refineries, quarries,
the locks and traffic lights.

And here's *Genevieve*
her folding funnel and aerial mast,
a curtained cockpit and the captain's Merc
strapped to a ramp at the stern.

These barges are tankers, or open bunkers-
football pitches of gravel, heaped coal, sand,
bellied so low it seems a swell,
a passing bow-wave, would stop
over her side and swamp her.

Facing the Pont Albert
is a naked rider on his bay-backed horse.
Too formal to be a Frink - a king
clearly above other naked men,
high and secure against a sky
that shows the western weather
rolling in from France and England.

This is a river city
in a land defined by rivers
— the Meuse, the Marne, the Somme —
big water-hawesers holding the land in regions,
working rivers, arteries we bleed for.

MATIN SUR LA MEUSE

*L'hôtel commence à se vider
et les trois-pièces sont sur le quai avec leur portable
à attendre un signal.*

*Les robustes péniches sillonnent au fil du fleuve,
elles accompagnent ou louvoient contre le courant
de la Meuse en crue printanière,
verte et brune selon l'heure,
pleine, stable et large, route fluviale
venant des Ardennes, passant par Verdun,
poussant jusqu'à la Mer du Nord.*

*Au long du fleuve il y a des hérons,
des cormorans, des raffineries, des carrières,
des écluses et des feux de signalisation.*

*Et voici Geneviève
sa cheminée qui se rabat et son antenne,
les rideaux de la cabine et la Mercedes
du capitaine arrimée à la poupe.*

*Ces péniches sont des tankers ou des cales ouvertes –
stades pleins de gravier, charbon, sable,
si ventruës qu'il semble qu'une vague,
un remous frappant la proue passerait
par-dessus bord et la submergerait.*

*Face au Pont Albert
un cavalier nu montant à cru.
Trop cérémonieux pour être un Frink – un roi
clairement au dessus d' autres hommes nus,
haut et sûr contre un ciel
qui déploie les vents d'ouest
dévalant de France et d'Angleterre.*

*C'est une ville de fleuve
dans un pays défini par des fleuves
— la Meuse, la Marne, la Somme —
de grands câbles d'eau délimitant les terres,
fleuves de labeur, artères où le sang a coulé.*

