

Anne Stevenson, In conversation

Durham 2015



Acclaimed poet Anne Stevenson, born in 1933, has a musical mind and ear and although she played piano and cello in her youth, it is through her poetry that her music is best expressed. She gained her first poetry prize at the age of 19, has published many collections and has been acknowledged with awards including the Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award and the American Poetry Foundation's Neglected Masters Award. Her work embraces many subjects, and frequently explores landscape and the human stories therein.

Anne was born in the UK, where she now lives, but grew up in New England and Michigan, and studied in the USA before returning to Britain. Her poem, *Still Life in Utah*, opens with the lines 'Somewhere nowhere in Utah'. This poem deeply influenced Harriet as a teenager, and is the source of our name.

Before we met, we had some email correspondence, and Anne shared her view that language needs to be transformed in a way:

‘... that makes a poem as much its language as its meaning. There is no way to teach this; no tricks or techniques. And I don't mean verse forms, rhymes or even regular rhythms. Writing poetry has more to do with unexpected connections between word patterns and the amazing plethora of human feelings and experiences that escape everyday speech. A poem has to be made out of daily speech to get behind it, as it were, into the mystery.’

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Meeting Anne and talking with her was a chance not just to meet the woman whose work has been so inspirational to me, and to many others, but also to find out more about the mystery that poetry – good poetry – reveals. Sitting around the table in her house, we began by reflecting on the poem, Still Life in Utah, and the way it stuck with me for years after I first read it at the age of fourteen.

Now that's most desirable, you know, if a poem sticks. Actually I think the test of a poem is whether it's memorable. Sometimes I think I've written a wonderful poem and nobody remembers it, and then something just thrown off, as it were, lasts. Other people have remembered Still Life in Utah. I almost never write a poem quickly, but in this case when I got back from that trip to the American West and collected my notes and impressions, the poem came easily in its present form.

Was this place in Utah a special place for you?

No, I was on a tour of America with my former husband – 1963. I hadn't been to Utah before and I had no sense of the country. I saw this scene just exactly as I described it.

In those days I was keen on making my end rhymes inconspicuous. When you read the poem, you read through the rhymes as if it were in free verse, though in fact it's very tightly rhymed. That's one of the things that I enjoy about writing poems - you can play a game at the same time you're saying something that you want to say. It's balancing the meaning with the form that is the challenge really.

Who was an early influence for you?

My first influence, I suppose, was Robert Frost because Frost brought home to me vividly the landscape of New England, Vermont, New Hampshire, where I grew up. He really made himself part of it, and it part of him. When you go anywhere in Vermont or New Hampshire, if you know anything about poetry, you think right away of Robert Frost.

I'm interested in the way that art, in particular writing, can influence the way a place becomes defined. What are your thoughts on this?

Simon Schama, in his book, *Landscape and Memory*, suggests that when you remember a place, you remember its cultural associations first and its natural scenery second. That happens a great deal with places you visit because you've read about them, don't you think?

Wallace Stevens said (among other things) that 'Poetry is the process of the personality of the poet'-- which brings me back to my own belief that in relation to the land, a poet's feeling when writing about a place bring about its cultural importance. Memorable words are an expression of a memorable writer's emotion, shared generally and recognised through language. Most people don't remember exact words when they translate them back into feelings; often, as in the case of Wordsworth, the poet's name becomes a substitute for both his feelings and his words. And so the Lake District becomes "Wordsworthian"-- which stands for generally "good" romantic feelings about that particular landscape and others like it.

Talking about Wordsworth, his writing has strongly influenced the way people have perceived the Lake District, for two hundred years now. Do you think this will always be this way?

The whole of the Lake District is seeped in literature. That makes for a problem in one sense, because a place can be stultified, frozen in its literature, in its past. What I imagine you're trying to do is rid nature of such stereotyped clichés and induce people to love and value it as first-hand experience. You're saying it's time that we write our own poems, express our own personalities, which may not be as memorable as Wordsworth's, but at least they are OUR OWN. The danger is that the inferior poetry of today's EVERYMAN/ EVERYWOMAN will supplant or clutter up the landscapes Wordsworth immortalised, so that pretty soon his work will lose vitality and become a mere academic field of study.

The world has changed so monumentally since Wordsworth was alive that you can't identify the Lake District he all but invented any longer with literature. The tendency is today to reject it and to write negatively or critically of Wordsworth's legacy. In a sense the reaction of writers today is counter romantic. Romanticism is, if anything, looked down on and sneered at.

I don't think I've ever really rejected what is still known as the romantic feeling for nature, but I certainly reject any connection nature seems to have with immortality and the sense that it will endure for ever, and that technological progress will reconcile us with the natural life of the earth. Look at the way our developers treat nature now, it is continually threatened.

In some ways it appears that we are living in a kind of post culture, which will never be able to achieve the natural conditions of the past - the very air we breathe has changed under pressure of technology, everything has changed. There is no way of going back.

So do you think that has reduced as sense of wonder at the mystery of life?

In some ways science has reduced our sense of wonder, in some ways it has vastly expanded it. It's probably wrong to think science can answer all the questions that we used to ask of religion.

How do you think that art, poetry, creative practice, can sit alongside science and work together?

Well, I think, like Wordsworth, that science and poetry should very much work together. To reject the discoveries of physics, chemistry, astronomy, biochemistry is entirely blind minded. It's a wonderful thing to have discovered that the world is made of atoms and protons and neutrons and quarks, although Lucretius in the first century BC anticipated something like the reality of the universe we know today. As its pieces get smaller and smaller and smaller, the cosmos gets larger and larger. We look out from our planet at billions of galaxies, *billions!* How many stars? Millions and billions of stars, millions of universes! So we *should* wonder, but somehow for many of us the feeling of wonder is lost in the immensity.

As for us poets, all we have is language and language clings to the past, so we're in a losing situation. All the arts, it seems to me, are presently in a down situation, whereas they were, until the end of the nineteenth century, in a strong position like religion. I'd be surprised if a hundred years from now there is very much in the way of great art or poetry.

I hope you're not right

I hope I'm not right! It breaks my heart to think of how much of nature and beauty we've sacrificed. But are people aware? Do they care for poems or music if it doesn't promote a popular personality or an acceptable ideology? There are so many branches of knowledge now that you can't point to any one which is going to answer the questions that artists have asked through the ages.

At my most pessimistic, I believe we're facing a post culture dominated by technology that doesn't know where it is going and may well get out of control. A lot of people feel there's much to be optimistic about, and there may be, but with the world's population growing at the rate it is, and global warming becoming the threat it is, and religious fanaticism being the danger it is, I fear the 21st century will host more holocausts and witness more genocides than the 20th.

Earth exploitation is certainly happening now in an exaggerated and terrible way. As your [Alberta poem](#) shows, Harriet, the notion of getting out of the earth any form of energy we can, hacking away at the planet any where we can, is frightening. I agree with you, fracking is a terrible mistake. What will it do to the tectonic plates, let alone the water supply? But will protest stop it? No! You can't stop people doing anything to extract energy. They'll frack until they wreck.

Do you think that poetry can express, or that you can write poems now to express what you've just said?

No. My feeling about poetry is like Auden's; it makes nothing happen. The best thing that is happening in poetry now is that younger poets feel they can write about their own experience fairly and reasonably objectively. They don't seem to feel they have to address themselves to enormous questions such as, what is the meaning of life or is there an after life, or are we doomed to die choked by our own waste, which is what I sometimes worry about. If I approach subjects like that, I approach them sideways, as it were.

Coming back to what you say about writing from your own experience, is there a place for you that is a very precious 'somewhere'?

Oh there are places that have been very precious to me and are still. I think I quoted to you those famous lines of Eliot about arriving where you started and knowing the place for the first time. My trouble is that when I go back to a place I've known as a child, I don't feel that I know the place for the first time but that I don't know it any more.

When I go back to my family's summer home in Vermont, which was very precious to me, I feel misplaced. I have a sister living permanently in the house, I have family there, it's all beautiful and good, and yet I don't like to go back, because it's so changed from the way I remember it. Somehow I want to get my own childhood back when I visit it.

As for a desirable refuges, at my age, the places I most wish to visit are either a part of my past (unreachable) or so fixed in my imagination that I don't want "reality" to spoil my imaginative image of them. I would have liked to visit Greece, the Balkan states, India and the rain forests of Brazil and Burma, and, if given an opportunity, I might. Or the other hand, the world is in such a catastrophic state of change, especially in those parts, that I prefer to stay at home and read their histories. I've seen enough on the ubiquitous screen to put me off tourism forever. And I HATE AIRPORTS!

I suppose what I really want to say is that one changes. One's attitude towards places changes as you grow older and you have different needs and wants.

So what is it that makes you happy?

Oh well, now, nothing in particular makes me happy! No, no, no - I've been through that period of wondering what could I write that would be lasting, hoping that people might remember my poems forever. Now I think, I'd like it if people remembered my poems, but I won't worry if they don't. I'm not going to write any differently.

I realise that there is much of life that I'll never understand. In the end, well, I'm grateful for what I've got. I have a lovely husband, I've got affectionate children and grandchildren who are well settled, I have many good friends. You can't ask for much more.

People's imaginations so often delude them - oh, I'm going to be this, I'm going to be that, I'm going to be great, you know. And then you find yourself in a job, you find yourself maybe having to do things that other people think you ought to do and you try to make them like you and then discover you've betrayed your belief in trustworthiness and understanding and, that for some reason you've said things that you think will make other people approve of you rather than what you actually believe - that sort of thing goes on a lot of the time.

I suppose I mean just keeping oneself honest is a huge task!

Who today do you look to for inspiration?

Inspiration doesn't so often strike as you get older. I don't think I look to younger poets for inspiration although I do admire many of them.

For instance, I very much admired my (slightly younger) friend Lee Harwood who died in July - I've just come back from a celebration of his life. That's a picture of us there - Lee Harwood and me at the Arvon Centre in Devon. I realise now that we gave each other an awful lot artistically but we could have known each other better and have helped each other more.

I used to look up enormously to Elisabeth Bishop, she was, I suppose, my chief mentor and I still think her poems are very good, but these days I am critical of her worshippers, as I suspect she would have been. Too much popular adulation is bad for a poet's poetry.

I believe that real greatness in art is only the privilege of a few, and in only a few instances. I may sometimes be good but most of the time I'm not good enough (laughs). I don't try to hide anything. If people want to read my poems I'm pleased, and when I like something I've written I'm pleased, but I don't want to work up my ego to a point where it's so vulnerable that if I don't succeed I kill myself. Bang!

Coming back to nature, how do you feel about changes today?

They are frightening. Species devastation, for instance, is very serious. One doesn't want to oppose human innovation or science but in so many respects the more land we cultivate to feed the millions and billions of people in the world, the fewer species the earth can support. There's somehow a terrible paradox here. The farmers in agribusiness are mostly big business men, notably without love for nature, and yet whole populations depend on them.

It does feel like there's an awful lot of destruction going on at the moment, and pressure, and it's not clear, perhaps not possible, to know where the tipping point is, if there has been too much damage.

I think it is impossible to write these days without being aware of that. A friend of mine recently wrote a poem about a man not begging but just sitting, on a street corner. I thought, well, this poem isn't saying anything more than here is this man

and here's what he's doing – like *Still Life in Utah*, the poem was pointing, like a picture. A word picture can do quite a lot of pointing.

Maybe one of the things we're talking about is training people to look at things. One of the signs of a born writer or an artist is that he or she simply LOOKS a lot of the time.

Probably the spring of real writing is curiosity. Once you're curious, you fill in what you miss with your imagination.

So with your poem, Still Life in Utah, what was actually happening?

I had no idea who these people were or who the boy was. Maybe his dog had been run over, that was what I first thought, and the father was trying to console him. But it could have been anything. The father might have had to shoot the dog because the dog chased sheep or something. Anyway, there are these figures set in a story situation but I didn't know the story. And so the poem became an unfinished story for the reader to finish as he or she wished.

And somehow it went home to me, that I wouldn't *ever* know the end of the story.

Anne Stevenson's Website: <http://www.anne-stevenson.co.uk/>