

Marco Fazzini

The Saying of It

Conversations on Literature and Ideas
with 13 Contemporary
English-Language Poets



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The Saying of It

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Above all, I should like to thank the poets included for having provided the kind of generous support that is not easily found. Their response to my proposal to exchange long talks about poetry, writing and translation was collaborative and encouraging.

I am also greatly indebted to all the artists who agreed to contribute to this enterprise, which began in 1988 – now so distant – when I first met Edwin Morgan in his Glasgow flat, together with my friend, Patrick Williams. I am now aware that Edwin Morgan's help, and the help of some of my teachers and friends, such as Armando Pajalich, Douglas Dunn and Valerie Gillies, was crucial, and led to all of the other meetings, chats, plans and achievements that followed in the subsequent thirty years.

For help of various kinds, I am most grateful to Biancamaria Rizzardi, Gloria Borghini, Sara Nannipieri and Douglas Reid Skinner for having transformed my manuscripts into an actual and readable publication.

Marco Fazzini

The Saying of It: An Introduction

Understanding what brings forth poetry, especially that of some of the more important contemporary poets, is no easy matter. Critics have investigated many of the technical aspects, as well as literary themes, forms and styles, but the voices of the writers themselves, the poets, and what they might explain about the work, are a different consideration.

To explain the gestation of this book, I would have to go back to the days when, as a young man, I wondered about the origins of the creativity and skills of the poets I had been reading, and whose work I had begun to admire. I have read many poets over the years and decades, but I never stopped admiring those whose work first deeply moved me, both on the page and through their voices. So, if any principle runs through all of these meetings, interviews and discussions about poetry, it is my curiosity about anyone involved in writing; this is the engine that has always driven me to meet and talk, sometimes in unexpected situations.

I was, and remain, curious about how and to what extent a poet is conscious of his or her results and the techniques used with a particular text, or for a translation; how the experiences of life can be transformed into literature; whether or not the urgency of a message is more important than the scansion of a line or the syllabic form to be followed; his or her relationship with predecessors and contemporaries; his willingness to innovate, or maybe even to align with the style of a group or collaborator; if and how such readings create a confluence of influences and styles at the time of writing a particular work; what is, in essence,

the origin of a poem as it progresses through various drafts, as it adapts to other poems included in a collection, as it becomes the representative text of a personal poetic or of an historical period; how, in short, it becomes a contemporary 'classic'.

In this book, authors discuss their careers, their expectations, their evolution as writers of poetry. Among those included are: Nobel Prize winners Derek Walcott and Wole Soyinka; the first 'makar' of contemporary Scotland, Edwin Morgan; award-winning Chris Wallace-Crabbe from Australia; Booker Prize winner Margaret Atwood; 2012-2015 Poet Laureate of Toronto George Elliott Clarke; and Charles Tomlinson from England. However, I never really conceived of it as a book until late in the day. It is, though, particularly valuable to me because it is, in some way, a record of my own life, friendships and memories of hours spent with these writers and intellectuals. Many of them are still great friends, people from whom I learned how to do research, write and understand from the inside that when we try to define the 'poetic' we usually mistakenly associate it with elusiveness, the random, spontaneous artistic creation, the impromptu.

In a conversation with Mark Strand – absent from this book because we never thought to formalise any of our many discussions – he recounted (and he repeated to some of my students in Venice) how the material that is published has been reviewed, revised and rewritten many times, reiterating that the much-emblazoned 'poetic inspiration' is less important than the other ninety percent, the 'hard work'; in the end, talent and the inspiration of ideas picked up play quite a secondary role. And then he did the same thing I saw him do with the famous jazz saxophonist, Steve Lacy, in the evening after a concert on a day I spent with him: he grabbed my head and banged it repeatedly against a wall. What he was saying was that, in the end, the techniques must be learned, refined and used with care and attention to detail so that no one can claim to have published a book, or played in a concert hall, or exhibited a painting, as often happens, while

being completely unaware of the tradition, the trade, teachers and schools; that simply by *thinking it to be so* he or she has the freedom to claim to be a poet, artist or avant-garde musician.

When I first interviewed Edwin Morgan, in 1988, I discovered that art does not always have to be serious, that you can trust those liberating moments in which an artist/performer/poet works into and out of his or her language with seeming ease. I am not speaking in particular of either the sound or the concrete poems Morgan wrote; rather, I am referring to his entire poetic oeuvre, and, particularly, to all the ways in which poets strike a balance between tradition and innovation, seriousness and joy, closed and experimental forms. It's the same feeling I had when, in 1990, I travelled to South Africa and met the late Douglas Livingstone, the most intriguing, reserved and famous poet of that country.

I'd been in the country for a few months before I met him in Durban, but a real friendship quickly blossomed, lasting until the day he died in 1996. His generosity also helped me to get in touch with several South African writers and critics, including Don MacLennan, Chris Mann, Stephen Gray, Patrick Cullinan, Stephen Watson, Shabbir Bhanoobhai, Douglas Reid Skinner, and many others. In those years, I discovered that he had a strong faith in the possibility of art and verbal mastery rescuing us, and that he never abandoned his neo-symbolist allegiance to ideas of literary excellence. He was renowned throughout the country for his skill with words and the structural tension this gave to his verse; for the appositeness of his semantically reverberating rhymes; and for his belief that the artist's skill can produce a cognitive epiphany of unflinching effectiveness. Casting light on the secrets of such art is what I have aimed for in all my interviews, and that has led me towards the search for the mode and depth of the poets' investigations into the formal aspects of writing, their commitment to an ephemeral yet present beauty, and their critique of the cliché-ridden society around us.

There are several meetings and interviews missing in this collection, both because some of them logically belonged in other books already published – *Conversations with Scottish Poets* (Aberdeen University Press, 2015) for instance – and because I have held some back for future projects. Even so, despite it not appearing here, I would like to remember my interview with Norman MacCaig in 1993 in Edinburgh. That meeting was of great importance to me as a translator and scholar. (I later met him again, in 1995, when we launched my translations of his work, together with Seamus Heaney and Valerie Gillies, at the National Library in Edinburgh.) In those years, I was beginning to work on essays on the theory of translation. I realised that in choosing a poet to translate, a translator reveals much about his or her own tastes. Also, he or she becomes aware of the limits of feeling and creating; it reminds the translator of what boundaries should be observed, for an unchecked intrusion into someone else's work and privacy risks frustration, and even misreading. There must be a slow and passionate developing of words, personalities and collaborative friendships, letting them reveal to us the undervalued parts of being. At the same time, they become friends, collaborators, more than mere acquaintances: poets who have shared projects, ideals, adventures, meetings and readings.

This has happened with several of the poets here included, and in particular with my friends Charles Tomlinson, Douglas Dunn, Meena Alexander, George Elliott Clarke, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Douglas Reid Skinner, etc. As for Seamus Heaney, my tribute article speaks of the many ideas, common friends, generous collaborations and silent help he gave me after we first corresponded in 1988, later meeting on several occasions. We never planned an 'official' interview, but what I gained from him and his writing is almost more than I could describe in words: a sincere companionship and sense of allegiance. I explore this in part.

I have always considered these interviews as gifts; they have no market or commercial value but speak rather of the poetry

of life and the life of poetry, helping us to transcend the pressures of economics and fulfil our need to be freely linked with other people. In one of his beautiful books, Jacques T. Godbout suggests that by giving ‘a gift’ to a friend one can bring forth the ‘unanticipated’, an essential surprise, enabling the building of social links. A poet would say that through it we introduce ‘grace’. One example of such ‘grace’ – both the grace of a gift given in the form of an interview, and the gift of being a poet – is contained in the interview given to me some years ago by Margaret Atwood:

“I really recommend this book to you. I’m a writer, yet this book is not about writing or how to write, or anything like that. It’s about gift theory. It’s called *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. What Lewis Hyde looks at is how things pass from one person to another. There are two ways in which they pass. Actually, there are three, but we’re not going into the third one, which is ‘stealing’. One of them is ‘buying’: you buy a commercial product. The other is ‘giving’: you give or receive a gift. A gift is not weighed and measured, nor can it be bought. As I say in my book, *Negotiating With the Dead*, a gift cannot be expected or demanded; rather, it is granted, or else not. In theological terms, it’s a grace, proceeding from the fullness of being. One can pray for it, but one’s prayer will not therefore be answered. If this were not so, there would never be any writer’s block. The composition of a novel may be one part inspiration and nine parts perspiration, but that one part inspiration is essential if the work is to live as art. (The parts vary for poetry, but both are still involved.) The activity of writing, if you are a serious writer at all, exists in the gift part of that diagram. You receive your gift, you practice your gift and you give away the products of your gift, but in order for other people to receive that it would happen to be writing.”

Yet, this is the land of the evening. Our culture begins at sunset. This is how Harold Bloom suggests we read our civili-

sation. He also observes that intelligent reading is in decline, and if we forget how to read and why it is important, we risk ending up by drowning in visual media. We are fallen angels. Like Hamlet, we live with the dilemma of being subject to the desire for transcendence while being trapped in a mortal animal. We remember we are angels, despite having fallen, only when we are engrossed or immersed in a state of reverie, trying to create something: a book, an artwork, a movie, a musical piece. The poetry of making, of creation, is always with us, although vilified and constantly threatened with murder: the murderousness of artless art that sells for astronomical figures and, in the end, says nothing; the murderousness of simple and superficial poetry by those who pretend to be poets and who aren't, who deceive readers with fake creations; the murderousness of minimalist music that confuses composition with noise; the murderousness of books made for a market of easy consumption and which are an insult to one's intelligence and the cultural expectations of younger generations.

In ancient Scotland, a poet was called 'makar', a term still in use today for contemporary exemplars, those who understand how to work creatively within a language, so as to bring it to life for their time and tradition. Creator, doer, craftsman: there is no shame here in using a term that reminds one that poetry, as any other art, requires the same kind of hard work as that required of a craftsman who makes a chair, a tool, or a musical instrument. These days, hard work and technique are only negatively referred to, especially in the field of commercial publishing and in the marketing of art, the only focus seeming to be on those ideas that fit the managing of leisure rather than on humbly spending years learning the foundations of versification, technique, structure and the masters' secrets. Everything is a bit falsified, pre-packaged daily, so that the means of distinguishing what is true art, or true poetry, are now obscured, almost hopelessly lost in indifference or the amorality of business.

And this, of course, will have worrying repercussions on future generations.

Ignorance gives birth to its own followers and puts them in power: this, perhaps, is the essence of the matter. Or, in a society in which little is shared for the simple pleasure of giving and sharing, or few gifts are made, mystification and division are the rule, in every field, because culture and art seem reduced to nothing but deals and no longer appear to contribute to the development of the nation. The impasse, in both the arts and politics, is abnormal and dangerous. This is the reason why I most value the interviews here contained: they are real gifts from which to learn and start again.

I never thought, I said, of these interviews as a book, and never counted how many hours, or days, or years it would take to achieve such an end: what is now published is more in the way of being a surprising archive made possible by meetings, correspondence, exchanges of opinion, mutual projects, ideas and influences, often coming out of joint readings or translating, sending manuscripts in progress, to books published or to be published, literary collaboration at many levels without any particular organisation through time. In publishing this book I hope – together with the curator of the series and the publisher – to intrigue scholars and lovers of poetry, especially young readers and students: it is they who, through all the ideas on the contemporary contained herein, are most likely to be moved by the same curiosity that moved me from the beginning, a desire to understand every single poetic, and the ways in which each poet has been able to express it, able to achieve the saying of it.

Marco Fazzini, Vicenza, 20th August 2016

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