James Fenton: Expert at Cross-Fertilisation

Much of James Fenton’s distinctiveness arises from how thoroughly he is a social poet and the restless inventiveness he has deployed in finding techniques, forms and varieties of language for the writing of social poetry. The variousness of his work is the product of a kind of self-effacement that looks outwards at the complex variousness of society which is reflected in the multiplicity of languages it uses. Consequently, one of the most prominent features of his work is its self-conscious exploration of heteroglossia. Nancy Glazener’s account of Bakhtin’s concept is helpful here:

Bakhtin derives the heteroglossia of literary discourses – their multiplicity and their tendentious interaction – ultimately from the stratification of social life, in which different social groups create distinctive discourses from their common language; as a result, the meaning of a word is always a function of its torque, of its being turned to incommensurate purposes by speakers who use it in different discourses. Likewise, these discourses, products of discrete but inextricable social formations, depend so much on their interrelationship for their intelligibility that they are ultimately significant only in relation to the entire complex of language use. Discourses cannot be tailored semantically to the expressive intentions of an individual without betraying the social fabric from which they have been cut.¹

The expressive intentions of individuals – which are the traditional subject of poetry – always carry with them, when they are present in Fenton’s work, the sense that they cannot be regarded accurately in isolation, that their shape, texture and cloth have been determined by their contextual fabric.

Fenton’s own explicit emphasis is on the social context of poetry, as evidenced in his theory of the poetries of “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” interest:
It is pretended that we either do or should read a poem in pursuit of its pure merit, but this is a narrow pursuit, and impossible. Our interest in a poem changes when we learn that it was written by Henry the Eighth, for instance. Nor is there anything wrong in reading poetry for its interest, though it be heresy to say so.

This dismissal of "purity" and defence of "extrinsic interest" is also a defense of the occasional in poetry – Fenton goes on to show how much more interest there is in the quatrain "In the corner one –/ I spy Love!/ In the corner None,/ I spy Love" when the reader knows it is by Coleridge. Then he shows how "Butchered to Make a Dutchman's Holiday" is interesting largely because it was written by "Breaker" Morant on the eve of his execution, and because of "the awful authenticity of the voice".

"Extrinsic interest" arises from our biographical interest in the poet; "intrinsic interest" relates to bits of the "real world" observed by the poet, the term is supposed to help in identifying those works of art which derive a part of their charge from, for instance, facts which are in themselves interesting. If, say, I had been in Romania last Christmas, and had therefore witnessed some of the major events, and had a clear view of what happened, and you asked me, and as an answer I sang you a ballad containing all the details of what was actually said and done during the trial of Nicolae and Elena, this would (what a dreadful fantasy) count as an intrinsically interesting poem. The critical things that might be said of it ("He has revived the street-ballad", etc) would pale into insignificance in the light of the facts themselves.

("Ars Poetica", 13 May 1990, 18)

Implicit behind Fenton's championing of both "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" interest is a dissatisfaction with the traditional lyric and its single "pure" voice: the former draws attention to the biographical and social context in which the poet speaks, and the latter brings that context into the poem's foreground. Another way of putting this would be to say that Fenton wants to introduce objective kinds of writing into his poetry alongside more conventional subjective ones – and sometimes almost to the exclusion of subjective ones.

One form this takes connects Fenton with a kind of "avant garde" writing to which he might otherwise seem vehemently opposed: