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FINDING A LANGUAGE

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TROUVER UNE LANGUE – FINDING A LANGUAGE

Poésie et poétique / Poetry and Poetics

**Présenté par Adrian Grafe et Nicolas Wanlin / Essays in French and English Edited by
Adrian Grafe and Nicolas Wanlin**

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JAMES FENTON IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA: FINDING A LANGUAGE FOR THE UNSAYABLE¹

Sara R. Greaves (Aix Marseille Univ. LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France)

In the early 1970s British poet James Fenton (1949-), whose poetry straddles the gap between high culture and political violence, worked as a newspaper reporter in South-East Asia and visited Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In the mid-1970s he spent two years in the Philippines and in 1980 he was in Korea where he witnessed the Gwangju Uprising. These places provided Fenton with the material for some of his most moving and admirable poems, as well as for his political essays published first by *Granta*² and later collected as *All the Wrong Places*³. Cambodia and Vietnam in particular gave rise to a handful of poems published in *The Memory of War and Children in Exile* (1983)⁴. Broadly speaking their theme is war as mediated through memory, their language designed to enable collective remembrance. The 1983 collection opens with “A German Requiem” and its paradoxical depiction of institutionalised forgetting in post-war Berlin, that is, the collective amnesia that Fenton’s poetic language takes steps to avert. It does not achieve this through the shock tactics of frontal reportage, but by accompanying his readers to the Cambodian killing fields, and back: “Stick with me and I’ll take you there”.⁵

1. Institutionalised forgetting

By the late 1970s, Fenton was working in Germany as foreign correspondent for *The Guardian*. His haunting poem “A German Requiem” (first published as “Elegy”, in 1981) comes out of his time there. It has a surreal aura and makes use of Fenton’s “secret narrative”

¹ This chapter, which dates from 2014 in its original version, is further developed and expanded in *Côté guerre côté jardin : excursions dans la poésie de James Fenton* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2016).

² James Fenton, ‘The Fall of Saigon’ in *Granta 15* (Cambridge: Granta Publications, 1985), p. 27-116.

³ *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of the Pacific Rim* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988).

⁴ *The Memory of War* was first published by The Salamander Press (Edinburgh, 1982) then with additional material as *The Memory of War and Children in Exile* (London: Penguin Books, 1983).

⁵ “I Saw a child”, *Yellow Tulips: Poems 1968-2011* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p.85.

technique as described by Dana Gioia,⁶ in which the reader is only given access to fragments of a story and left to construct it according to his or her own lights. Gioia opines that in the earlier poems this technique, although initially effective, is ultimately unsatisfactory. Not so this poem; like the Cambodia poems, it takes over where journalism fails and Fenton's selection of image and detail flesh out and illuminate what goes unsaid. By appealing to the imagination, it builds remembrance around striking facts. Fenton says in a 1984 interview by poet and critic Grevel Lindop: "One of the bits in it that's quite often quoted when people write about it, is a recollection of Berlin after the war, where they dug up the squares and buried people with their enamel door plates for identification purposes".⁷ However, what the poem portrays is a collective amnesia, ritualised by church and state, disconcertingly presented through irony and melancholy sarcasm:

How comforting it is, once or twice a year,
To get together and forget the old times.
As on those special days, ladies and gentlemen,
When the boiled shirts gather at the graveside
And a leering waistcoat approaches the rostrum.
It is like a solemn pact between the survivors.
The mayor has signed it on behalf of the freemasonry.
The priest has sealed it on behalf of all the rest.
Nothing more need be said, and it is better that way –⁸

The war itself as experienced physically, the losses on the frontlines, the bombing of cities by Allied forces and above all the Nazi extermination camps, all lie at the centre of the poem, just as they are harboured somewhere in the country's subconscious, out of sight and out of mind, officially unremembered and above all un-commemorated. Claude Lanzmann, director of the 1985 film *Shoah*, also deplored this state of affairs: "For thirty years Germany, incapable of facing the Holocaust, has carried on as if Nazism had never existed. It was never mentioned. Rich and well-fed, Germany was also without a past, her young men – those who today are between thirty and forty – were zombies."⁹ The poem, then, as its name suggests (a

⁶ Dana Gioia, 'The Rise of James Fenton' in *The Dark Horse* 8 and 9/10 (Edinburgh: HappenStance Press, 1999 and 2000), <http://danagioia.com/essays/reviews-and-authors-notes/the-rise-of-james-fenton/>

⁷ "James Fenton in conversation with Grevel Lindop", *PN Review* 11, 2 (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), p.31.

⁸ *Yellow Tulips*, *op. cit.*, p.13.

⁹ My translation. "Pendant trente ans, l'Allemagne incapable d'affronter l'Holocauste, a pris le parti de faire comme si le nazisme n'avait pas existé. On n'en parlait pas. Grasse et riche, l'Allemagne était aussi sans passé, ses jeunes hommes – ceux

requiem is a religious mourning ritual), makes a sort of bid to fill that gap, those haunted empty spaces within German cities. In Eliotian mode, poetry is summonsed to draw together the loose strands of emptiness that the poem presents us with, “discover[ing perhaps] a ritual” out of oblivion:

It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down.
It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses.
It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.
It is not your memories which haunt you.
It is not what you have written down.
It is not what you have forgotten, what you must forget.
What you must go on forgetting all your life.
And with any luck oblivion should discover a ritual. [...]¹⁰

The poet undoubtedly had Cambodia in mind as he wrote this poem, and his South-East Asia poems seem to spring from an emotional need that was very likely felt to be public as well as personal. The Vietnam war was, after all, the focal point of a generation and the epitome of neo-colonial tragedies. Thus, although Fenton’s South-East Asia poems include would-be reportage, in the form of diary entries (“Dead Soldiers”), notes (“In a Notebook”) and newspaper copy (“Lines For Translation into Any Language”¹¹), his poems were not written at the heat of the moment from the front, they are not “war poems”, as Fenton himself points out: “The reporter is not obliged to kill people and this is the central experience at war. I cannot arrogate myself the title of a war poet...”¹² Rather, as Joe Moran writes: “[Fenton’s] war poetry (as the title of his second volume suggests) usually deals with the painful and inevitably more complex process of remembrance and mourning.”¹³ In doing so, it assumes a public function consisting in an attempt to redress the imbalance between an adult society (the West) inclined to forget, and those children whose lot it is to set out in life with a horrendous burden of indelible memories. As Aharon Appelfeld – whose life collapsed into nightmare at

qui ont aujourd’hui entre trente et quarante ans – étaient des zombies”, “De l’holocauste à *Holocauste* ou comment s’en débarrasser” in *Au Sujet de Shoah* (Paris: Belin, 1990), p.312.

¹⁰ *Yellow Tulips*, *op. cit.*, p.5.

¹¹ *Idem.*, respectively pp. 17, 15 and 20.

¹² Manuel Gomez Lara, “A Conversation with James Fenton”, *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses 12* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Universidad de la Laguna, 1986), p. 163.

¹³ “Out of the East: James Fenton and Contemporary History” in *Literature and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, September 2000), p. 56.

the age of seven – writes: “In children, memory is a receptacle that never empties”,¹⁴ or Fenton, on Cambodian and Vietnamese refugee children in “Children in Exile”: “These victim-children have been released on parole. / They will remember all of it”.¹⁵

If indeed Fenton’s aim be more public than personal, it should come as no surprise that the language he “finds” does not seek to bear the strain of traumatic experience in terms of disjointedness or fragmentation, or that the unremitting attacks on humanity that he writes about do not translate into attacks on the signifying power of human language, but into a language grounded in actuality, and in its own heritage.

2. A grounded language

Fenton’s poetic language is both a poetry of witness, grounded in reality as experienced in the-world-out-there, and a poetic voice grounded in its poetic tradition. Perhaps we should recall here his dislike of confessional poetry and the self-absorption he deplored in some poets of his generation. In his “Letter to John Fuller” (1972) Fenton lampoons practitioners of confessional poetry such as the then influential poet and critic Al Alvarez, author of *The Savage God – A Study of Suicide* (1971) and promoter of Sylvia Plath’s poetry; he writes, in light verse using comic rhymes, an acerbic critique sweeping across the spectrum of contemporary British poetry through a burlesque eulogy of suicide as the ultimate hallmark of the good poet:

Death is the envy of the hicks,
The last crap shot, the final fix,
It is the burning of the ricks.
Lovelier than sex, it
Beckons us home across the Styx
And we must exit.¹⁶

The South-East Asia poems are of soberer stuff, although they are not without (dark) humour. But the language *per se*, in terms of syntax and morphology, bears no trace of breaking up under the strain of the experience. The gravity of the subject-matter in these poems does not

¹⁴ My translation. “Chez les enfants, la mémoire est un réservoir qui ne se vide jamais.” *Histoire d’une vie*, Valérie Zenetti (trans) (Paris: Editions de l’Olivier, 2004), cited in Nayla Chidiac, *Ateliers d’écriture thérapeutique* (Issy-les-Moulineaux: Elsevier Masson, second edition, 2013), p. 16.

¹⁵ *Yellow Tulips*, *op. cit.*, p.21.

¹⁶ *The Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems 1968-1983*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 61.

push the poet to extreme linguistic novelty, to carving out a new language equal to the task, such as the autonomous poetry as described, for instance, by Gertrud Koch with reference to post-Holocaust poetry.¹⁷ Such poetry, moreover, and in particular aestheticist criticism, lies very far from Fenton's aims, and however varied the poetic techniques, the language is poised and accessible.

Let us consider briefly, in order, the matter of the five poems of section II of Fenton's 1983 collection, *The Memory of War and Children in Exile*. In "Cambodia" we are presented with a parting of ways, a sort of fork in the road in which one man, a traumatised survivor, is contrasted with one then two, three, four, five then a million or more men who have died, and "still the war goes on".¹⁸ This simple yet powerful poem, redolent of children's counting songs, tells of Fenton's leave-taking from his Cambodian friends before being evacuated from Phnom Penh as it fell to the Khmer Rouge, and the ensuing years of horror and guilt from afar. It can also be seen to speak volumes about neo-colonialism in the way it contrasts the single individual ready with his "best advice"¹⁹ (Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* comes to mind) and the ensuing massacre.

The poem "In a Notebook" is a "fall-from-Eden" poem, the delicate pastoral setting giving way to widespread destruction. It tells a similar story to "Cambodia" and to certain passages of *All the Wrong Places*,²⁰ of the wide-eyed traveller who lacks the key to the unfamiliar surroundings he finds himself in: "And I sat drinking bitter coffee wishing / The tide would turn to bring me to my senses".²¹ This theme is taken up again in "Dead Soldiers", where, as Joe Moran has pointed out, the neo-colonial situation is clearly developed and the problem of incorrect deciphering through reliance on inappropriate cultural stereotyping is made explicit:

But this mimicking of colonial decadence – with orderlies carrying ice packs on their handlebars, and each diner attended by 'one of the other ranks / Whirling a table-napkin to keep off the flies' [17] – deceives the narrator into believing that he knows how to read the

¹⁷"Autonomous art draws its strength from the theorem of the imagination, from the assertion that art is not representation but presentation, not reproduction but expression." My translation. "L'art autonome puise sa force dans le théorème de l'imagination, dans l'affirmation que l'art n'est pas représentation, mais présentation, pas reproduction, mais expression."

¹⁸ "Transformations esthétiques dans la représentation de l'inimaginable" in *Au Sujet de Shoah*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

¹⁹ *Yellow Tulips*, *op. cit.*, p.14.

²⁰ *Idem*, p.14.

²¹ After staying at a Cambodian monastery in Ba Xuyen province, Vietnam, the parting shot of one of the monks comes as a nasty shock to the young Fenton: "'Of course, we know why you have been staying with us all this time.' [...] 'I'm a journalist,' I said, 'and I hate the CIA.' 'But of course you'd say you hated the CIA.' He was quite serious, and what he said destroyed, at a stroke, all the pleasure of the last days", (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), p. 42.

²¹ *Idem*, p.15.

situation. He fully expects these cliché-ridden figures to ‘slip away with the swag’ when the going gets tough and live out the rest of their days in reduced but still luxurious circumstances in the South of France. But these events and characters do not quite fit the interpretative framework his Western mindset has imposed on them: ‘But we were always wrong in these predictions. / It was a family war. Whatever happened, / The principals were obliged to attend its issue’.²²

The next poem, “Lines for Translation into Any Language”, tells of the fall of Saigon, the tone becoming increasingly clipped and objective with the first-person pronoun putting in only a brief appearance at the beginning, as if to tell once again the same story of a Western mindset giving way to a new, hitherto unimagined reality and being forced to face unpleasant facts: “Other spontaneous demonstrations in their favour were organised by the victors”.²³

“Children in Exile” is a much longer poem (204 lines; it relates the evolution of four deeply traumatised Cambodian and Vietnamese children who have been adopted by an American couple living in Italy. It provides many more facts about life under the Khmer Rouge than the previous poems, but its main focus is on healing, which, for the anti-imperialist poet-narrator, depends on further political and intellectual adjustments:

They are thriving I see. I hope they always thrive
Whether in Italy, England or France.
Let them dream as they wish to dream. Let them dream
Of Jesus, America, maths, Lego, music and dance.²⁴

These poems deal with political violence used against innocents, yet the voice does not as it were falter and this theme is always mediated, euphemised, historicised and rhetoricised through recognisable, often classical resources of poetic language.

3. A language for the unsayable

Fenton’s poems approach the Cambodian self-genocide through a language which owes its power to a certain incongruity, a certain disproportionality. In Lanzmann’s widely-acclaimed film, produced two years after the publication of *The Memory of War and Children in Exile*, a comparable, albeit dissimilar, approach prevailed:

²² Joe Moran, “Out of the East...”, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

²³ *Yellow Tulips*, *op. cit.*, p.20.

²⁴ *Idem*, p.29.

Lanzmann remains strictly within the limits of the representable: for the unrepresentable, the actual massacre of millions of people on an industrial scale, he refuses any actual visual representation. No images of the extermination itself, the possibility of its representability is not even suggested by existing visual archives, which usually abound in films on this subject. With this empty space Lanzmann draws a line between what is humanly, aesthetically imaginable and the aspect of the extermination which defies all imagination.²⁵

Fenton's language for another site of the unsayable, the Cambodian tragedy, draws a similar kind of line, establishing a limit between what is "humanly, aesthetically imaginable" and what is not. As Tim Kendall puts it, "Restraint is the conspicuous characteristic of Fenton's poetry of Indochina",²⁶ to which should be added, after Giorgio Agamben in *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, the technique of "euphemisation". The Italian philosopher is concerned with how survivors of the extermination camps conceptualised what they experienced and witnessed, with the kinds of words they used, and he observes in the course of his enquiry a frequent recourse to euphemism. In the following extract he reflects on the words not of a former internee but of the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who escaped to the United States before the war, in an interview given when the facts of the Final Solution were coming out "down to the smallest detail". She says:

Before it happened we used to say, all right, we have enemies. There's nothing unusual about that. Why shouldn't we have enemies? But this was different. It was as if an abyss was opening up beneath us. [...] It shouldn't have happened. I'm not only referring to the numbers of victims. I mean the method, the production of corpses and all the rest. No need to go into detail. It shouldn't have happened. Something happened there that we are unable to reconcile ourselves with. None of us can.²⁷

Agamben comments upon Arendt's interview as follows:

²⁵ My translation. "Lanzmann se cantonne strictement aux limites du représentable : pour l'irreprésentable, le massacre concret de millions de gens à l'échelle industrielle, il refuse toute représentation concrète par l'image. Pas d'images de l'extermination elle-même, la possibilité de sa représentation n'est même pas évoquée par des images d'archives existantes, qui foisonnent d'habitude dans les films sur ce sujet. Par ce "blanc" Lanzmann fixe la limite entre l'humainement, l'esthétiquement imaginable et la dimension inimaginable de l'extermination." Gertrud Koch, "Transformations esthétiques dans la représentation de l'inimaginable" in *Au Sujet de Shoah*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

²⁶ Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.257.

²⁷ *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993, pp. 13-14), cited in Giorgio Agamben, *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz: l'archive et le témoin, Homer Sacer III*. Pierre Alferi (trans.). (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), p.76 (my back-translation).

Each sentence here seems to be ballasted with a meaning so painful that it forces the speaker to resort to formulations that are halfway between euphemism and the ineffable.²⁸

James Fenton's language also seems euphemistic when he presents his before-and-after scenarios through the eyes and thoughts of a persona who is a sort of Western Everyman, using classical, elegant English. Indeed, the before-and-after scenarios provide as it were buffer zones either side of a central space of violence that his language barely encroaches upon but which suffuses these texts. A similar phenomenon has been observed by Nayla Chidiac in Holocaust writing. She observes that Jorge Semprun's writing, over the years following his imprisonment at Buchenwald, recounted his life up to the gate of the concentration camp or else from the moment he left, but kept away from the experience within its boundaries until forty years had gone by, in *L'Écriture ou la vie*²⁹. She analyses this before-and-after writing as follows:

This writing space, if one can call it such, before and after the concentration camp, resembles two containers; the writer constructs two doors and leaves them closed to test their robustness before venturing to pour into them a content he fears may overflow.³⁰

This seems to me highly relevant to the way Fenton's South-East Asia poems work, structured as they are as narratives, as "writing spaces" interspersed with ellipsis, analepsis and so on, as can be seen in the following two poems, "Dead Soldiers" and "Lines for Translation into Any Language".

"Dead Soldiers" is set some time during the Cambodian war waged by the Khmer Rouge and other communist forces – a war perceived favourably by many Left-wing intellectuals at the time as a war of decolonisation and self-determination³¹ – and describes an elaborate

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Ce qui reste...*, *op. cit.*, p.76.

²⁹ (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

³⁰ My translation. "Cet espace d'écriture, si l'on peut l'appeler ainsi, avant et après le camp, est comme deux contenants, deux portes qu'on édifie, qu'on laisse pour éprouver leur solidité avant de pouvoir y verser un contenu dont on craint les débordements", *Ateliers d'écriture thérapeutique* (Issy-les-Moulineaux: Elsevier Masson [2^{ème} édition], 2013), p.20.

³¹ "There is no doubt that in their eyes [i.e. the 'Asians', the experts on Asia writing for the French daily *Le Monde* in 1975], that decolonisation was inevitable. They were not the only ones to think so. Claude Julien, chief editor of *Le Monde*'s sister paper *Le Monde diplomatique*, and former head of the daily paper's Foreign news department, rode this mounting wave and defended the emancipation of developing countries against American imperialism." My translation. "Il ne fait pas de doute, à leurs yeux [les 'asiates', les experts de l'Asie du journal *le Monde* en 1975], que la décolonisation est inéluctable. Ils ne sont d'ailleurs pas les seuls. A la tête du *Monde diplomatique*, une filiale du quotidien, Claude Julien, l'ancien chef du service

lunch held on the battlefield by Prince Sihanouk's uncle, to which Fenton as foreign correspondent was invited.³² It begins as follows:

When His Excellency Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey
Invited me to lunch on the battlefield
I was glad of my white suit for the first time that day.
They lived well, the Norodoms, they had style.
The brandy and the soda arrived in crates.
Bricks of ice, tied around with raffia,
Dripped from the orderlies' handlebars.³³

In this opening, attention is commanded by a falsely casual tone in free verse; however, the full name and title of the Cambodian royal, the invitation to lunch on the battlefield and the white suit all contradict any normality, creating an effect that smacks of Lewis Carroll. This effect is maintained in the following lines with the juxtaposition of highly sophisticated luxury whose cruelty ("The dishes piled high with frogs' legs, / Pregnant turtles, their eggs boiled in the carapace..."³⁴) is paralleled by the surrounding violence of the war, itself strangely deflected ("The APCs / Fired into the sugar palms but met no resistance"). The poem captures the surrealism of this unusual personage and his retinue³⁵ and displays dark humour: "It was like eating between rows of morris dancers – / Only they didn't kick", or, with reference to the empty cognac bottles: "They called the empties Dead Soldiers / And rejoiced to see them pile up at our feet".

Literarily speaking we are, as it were, on familiar ground. Indeed, the diners are familiar figures with the stock characterisation of Pol Pot's brother as "the club bore", the portrayal of Chantaraingsey as a sort of perverse enlightened despot, and even the final interpretation of

Etranger du quotidien surfé sur cette vague qui grossit en défendant l'émancipation des pays en voie de développement contre l'impérialisme américain." Raphaëlle Bacqué, "Le jour où... *Le Monde* salue l'arrivée des Khmers rouges", *Le Monde* (25 July, 2014), pp.20-21.

³² This poem chimes with a comment made by Jean Lacouture, also foreign correspondent in Cambodia at the time, who was slower to recognise the Khmer Rouge genocide than Fenton: "I could not imagine that people [...] I had known, with whom I had dined, were other than they had seemed to me to be ». My translation. "Je ne pouvais imaginer que des hommes, [...] que j'avais fréquentés, avec qui j'avais dîné, soient autre chose que l'impression que j'en avais gardée." Luc Cédelle, "Mort de Jean Lacouture, journaliste et biographe, vorace et humaniste". *Le Monde* (19-20 July), 2015.

³³ *Yellow Tulips*, *op. cit.*, p.17.

³⁴ Throughout this paragraph: *idem*, p.17.

³⁵ One is reminded of Hélène Cixous's *L'histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge*, staged by Ariane Mnouchkine), Chantaraingsey was reputedly a feudal yet romantic, novel-writing warlord, <http://khmerization.blogspot.fr/2012/12/norodom-chantaraingsey-cambodias-prince.html>.

the conflict as “a family war”³⁶ with its implicit reference to the violent passions of the Atrides family of Greek mythology is a rationalisation with reference to recognisable – Western – universals. It is upon familiar topoi and intertextuality that Fenton relies in this hysterical, histrionic lunch with its improbable gathering of diners steeped in the tragic irony of a latter-day decadent Vienna. Through such means the language becomes performative and the reader experiences the shift in perception. In the gaps (ellipses) between the lunch on the battlefield, the insinuations of the conversation with Pol Pot’s brother recounted in the diary entry (“A few weeks later”³⁷) and the present time (“I have been told that the prince is still fighting / Somewhere in the Cardamoms or the Elephant Mountains”³⁸), the stereotypes have proved misleading and the poet-reporter and fellow journalists have had to revise their assumptions: “A few were cajoled into leaving, a few were expelled, / And there were villains enough, but none of them / Slipped away with the swag”.³⁹ Invited to shift dialectically between familiar universals and a particular situation, the reader is brought up short in the face of the grim hindsight that pervades the poem and brought to reflect on neo-colonial war and its multiple challenges to the Western mindset.

In “Lines for Translation into Any Language”, which deals with the fall of Saigon, thirteen factual statements are aligned and the fall of the city is described in a brief narrative – also outlined in Fenton’s *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of the Pacific Rim*⁴⁰ – in a list of numbered lines:

1. I saw that the shanty town had grown over the graves and that the crowd lived among the memorials.
2. It was never very cold – a parachute slung between an angel and an urn afforded shelter for the newcomers.
3. Wooden beds were essential. [...] ⁴¹

³⁶ *Yellow Tulips, op. cit.*, p.19.

³⁷ *Idem*, p.18.

³⁸ *Idem*, p.19.

³⁹ *Idem*, p.19.

⁴⁰ “Already a large fire had begun, fuelled no doubt by the gasoline which was often kept in the houses of the poor. Soon it was clear that a whole block was ablaze, and that the fire was spreading. [...] The next day I walked around the burnt-out area, a huddled group of jerry-built shacks which appeared to have encroached on an old Catholic graveyard. In the middle of the ruins, the graves had been unearthed again. One of them bore the legend *Memento Mori*. It was said that the fire brigade had refused to put out the blaze until massive bribes had been produced. A large number of poor people’s homes had consequently been destroyed”, *op. cit.*, p.74.

⁴¹ *Yellow Tulips, op. cit.*, p.20.

These “lines” are lines of poetry but also simply of print: a list of facts in note form such as a journalist might put before them to help make sense of what they have witnessed, isolating each piece of information. The numbered presentation accompanies the crescendo as the poem unfolds in stages leading up to the fall of the city. In this case we have “before” but not “after”, although the sinister line no. 13 is in fact proleptic and reveals the revised judgement of the poet: “Other spontaneous demonstrations in their favour were organised by the victors”.⁴² The events took place in Saigon, but the sense of impending catastrophe also concerns Phnom Penh and the countdown to Year Zero, as the polysemic title seems to suggest. Indeed, the “any” in “Lines for Translation into Any Language” can mean that the lines would be appropriate anywhere, thus reading with cynical black humour as referring to a familiar political scenario in which populations are taken hostage by hollow promises and traitors, and become pawns in someone else’s game, deprived of all possibility of self-determination. Any language will do to tell that story... Yet the title is also a cry for help: the situation is desperate, someone somewhere has to listen – “lines for translation into *any* language”. The title thus opens both on to a kind of universality, and a particular catastrophe.

Similarly, as with “Dead Soldiers”, “Lines for Translation into Any Language” tells two stories. One narrative concerns the final hours of a war, the other a perceptual evolution from romanticism to realism that takes place in language. Indeed, in the first few lines the speaker shows sympathy for the disrupted lives of the refugees and the real is suffused with surreal imagery that lends the events a sort of oneiric timelessness that euphemises the refugees’ living conditions: “I saw that the shanty town had grown over the graves and that the crowd lived among the memorials.” And: “It was never very cold – a parachute slung between an angel and an urn afforded shelter for the newcomers”.⁴³ The choice of words – the organic term “grown over” and the casual verb “slung” – deflects the danger the people are in and romanticises it. Similarly, in the ensuing lines, classical rhetoric is used to euphemise violence, and death, as in this balanced antithesis: “The shanty town was destroyed, the cemetery restored”. Tucked away unobtrusively in the middle of the poem, as if to soften the blow of the deaths of the people we have been invited to empathise with, rhetoric comes into play through the use of parallelism and par rhyme. The line seems slightly too pat until the

⁴² *Yellow Tulips*, *op. cit.*, p.20. In Fenton’s travel essay “The Fall of Saigon” he reports a conversation with a group of South Vietnamese officers: “I asked them why they were afraid. They were well aware, they said, that in Phnom Penh the people had greeted the Khmer Rouge with open arms. But they said that was just for appearances. Afterward there would be a settling of accounts” *All the Wrong Places*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁴³ *Idem*, p.20.

tropes turn the language in upon its vertical axis with a mirroring effect, as if life and death had become coterminous in this particular nightmare.

The “lines” of the title are also frontlines, backlines and borderlines, and the shifting lines of alliances as they are blurred and confused by betrayal and opportunism (“When the victorious army arrived, they were welcomed by the firebrigade”), in the process of which seemingly innocuous or homely words or phrases like “firebrigade” and “in their favour” turn sinister. Along with “spontaneous demonstration” they are repeated and shown to be nothing more than interchangeable counters or pawns hollowed of all meaning, since the firebrigade is corrupt and the spontaneity has been organised. We are reminded of the children of the Cambodian pagodas, chosen because they look healthier than most and made to line the road so as to impress favourably the visiting royalty⁴⁴, or the vast disciplined rallies of North Korea. The lines indicate a moral debacle, a humanist collapse, enacted by the language itself in an ironic meta-discourse, showing how good language can be at making a show of being meaningful...

In such ways Fenton’s South-East Asia poems use ordinary words, recognisable syntax and classical rhetoric both to conceal and reveal a violent reality, to powerful effect. They contain pent-up emotion within the bounds of an elegant English that is itself a form of euphemism, while the classical tradition it connotes as it were wholesale implicates the reader in a cultural, intellectual and perceptual reappraisal enacted in the poems. Both the narrative structuring around ellipses and the standard English are euphemising techniques which also serve as a kind of supportive scaffolding (in the psychological sense) for writer and reader alike. It seems to me no small achievement to succeed in a handful of poems in drawing the reader’s attention in the eighties to one of the twentieth century’s catastrophes, the “genocidal” regime of Democratic Kampuchea,⁴⁵ at a time of highly contradictory representations. Finding a poetic language grounded in the experience of a Western reporter, in his observations and the evolution of his consciousness, as well as in traditional, and thereby supportive, resources of narrative and poetry, Fenton helps lay the foundations of collective memory.

⁴⁴ *A dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*, Norman Lewis (London: Eland, 1982) (first published 1951).

⁴⁵ Philip Short in *Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004), cited in Henri Locard, *Pourquoi...*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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