

Out of the East: James Fenton and Contemporary History

Joe Moran Liverpool John Moores University

James Fenton is highly unusual among contemporary poets in not only writing about history but also participating in it, having been present at many of the major international wars and revolutions of the last twenty-five years. Fenton went to Indochina in 1973, travelling in and reporting from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In 1975, he was evacuated from Phnom Penh just before the Khmer Rouge arrived, and moved to Saigon, where he famously rode on the first North Vietnamese tank to reach the Presidential Palace. Fenton was the *Guardian's* correspondent in Germany in the late 1970s, witnessed the Kwangju massacre in Korea in May 1980, and in the mid-1980s reported from Mali, Ethiopia and the Philippines for the *New York Review of Books*, *Granta* and the *Independent*. Much of Fenton's work draws on these experiences, and this article seeks to examine some of the issues raised by the representation of contemporary history in his poetry. In his commitment to the rootedness of poetry in the concrete historical world, one of his major influences has clearly been the early work of W.H. Auden. Fenton's travels recall Auden's youthful tours of Germany, Iceland, Spain and China in the 1920s and 1930s, and indeed Fenton has written about the eerie synchronicity of hearing of the death of Auden – 'the poet I most admired' – as he went through the passport check at Heathrow before his flight to Vietnam.¹ At the same time, Fenton does not quite fit into a 1930s notion of the poet as revolutionary witness, partly because of his own historically specific preoccupations. While Auden's context was a sense of impending crisis around the rise of Fascism in Europe, Fenton typically writes about the much more complex aftermath of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Asia and the Middle East.

Some of Fenton's interest in these issues is prefigured in two early poems written before his journey to Indochina, 'Our Western Furniture' and 'The Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford'. The first of these is a twenty-one sonnet sequence about the enforced ending to Japan's isolationist policy by an American expedition under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry in the 1850s. Fenton says that this was written in direct response to the highly specialized subject set by the judges of Oxford's Newdigate Prize for Poetry: 'The Opening of Japan, 1853-54'.² But writing in the year of the Tet offensive, Fenton clearly aims to use this early instance of American expansionism as a way of commenting on the United States' subsequent involvement in Southeast Asia. The poem's epigraph, in fact, quotes from Perry's report to Congress in 1856, in which he warns that America's main imperial rival will be Russia, as both seek to extend across Asia from different directions, clearly anticipating the domino theory formulated in the Cold War: 'The Saxon and the Cossack will meet ... The antagonistic exponents of freedom and absolutism must thus meet at last and then will be fought the mighty battle on which the world will look with breathless interest.'³ Fenton begins here a long-held opposition to American political and military ascendancy, as he has President Millard Fillmore justifying the United States' actions through the doctrine of manifest destiny: 'The striding centuries / Turn cities into dust as leaves to loam / And cause New Wonders from the dust to rise.' (*TM*, 47).

But the poem also is not quite as simple as this, since it makes clear that there is nothing so obvious as gunboat diplomacy by the more powerful nation – although this is partly ironic, because America's appeal for 'friendship' in the diplomatic exchange of gifts and 'display of skills on either side' is still supported by a powerful squadron of ships ('Sensing your strengthening sinews with delight / You give us guns, and challenge us to fight.' (*TM*, 45)) Other Japanese voices in the poem are in favour of co-operating with the Americans, though, and the ill-effects of the seclusion policy – the famine and peasant discontent under the Tokugawa Shogunate, 'who steal the money that the rice-crop yields' (*TM*, 34) – are also described. The new American consul to Japan, Townsend Harris, reflects on how 'the frock coats of our motheaten urbanity' seem incongruous and unbecoming in their new home:

Dumped in the temple garden in the sun
Our western furniture looks out of place,
It reeks of cities and a moneyed nation.
What are we doing in this carapace? (*TM*, 48)

At a time (1968) when many of his contemporaries were engaged in more obviously strident protest poetry, it is clear that, even in this first published work, Fenton eschews the diagnostic, imperative tone of Auden's early poems ('Consider this and in our time') in favour of the more dialogic

qualities of narrative. The narrator tells the story from different perspectives and personae whose 'views / Were less than partial glimpses of the truth / Which worked unseen,' and finally concludes that he would not

Presume to sit in judgment on the past
Or to point out the baddies in the cast ...
Instead we offer you an almost-fiction
Constructed on a grid of contradiction. (*TM*, 53)

Fenton also deals with the legacy of imperialism in another poem from his first collection, 'The Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford,' which centres on the institutional efforts of a culture to read its own past. It again returns indirectly to a period of confident empire-building – although the visit to the museum in the poem is set in the present, the Pitt-Rivers still preserves its Victorian character, resembling 'with its dusty girders, / A vast gymnasium or barracks' (*TM*, 13). The huge expansion of museums in Britain in the late nineteenth century (about a hundred opened in the 1870s and 1880s, the Pitt-Rivers being founded in 1884) was clearly a response to the perceived need to narrativize and celebrate Britain's imperial dominance. The museum's exhibits in the poem are primarily the cultural treasures of Britain's colonial outposts: a Devil Doctor's mask, 'coolie' cigarettes, nut castanets, sistrums, whistling arrows and other hunting instruments, for instance. Moreover, the arrangement of these exhibits inscribes a Social Darwinist narrative of Anglo-Saxon hegemony – in fact, this was one of the principal innovations of General Pitt-Rivers himself, an anthropologist much influenced by Darwin and a friend of 'Darwin's bulldog,' T. H. Huxley. As Tony Bennett has pointed out, the displays here are arranged not geographically or culturally but according to Pitt-Rivers's widely copied 'typological' system, in which similar exhibits are displayed together in an evolutionary series in order to show the gradual cultivation of 'savage' peoples.⁴ Fenton's poem clearly points to the pedagogic purpose of this account of the white man's burden, as his museum visitor encounters parties of schoolchildren with their teachers:

For teachers the thesis is salutary
And simple, a hierarchy of progress culminating
In the Entrance Hall, but children are naturally
Unaware of and unimpressed by this. (*TM*, 13)

The poem as a whole seems to undermine the museum's progressive narrative by siding with the disrespectful schoolchildren who 'giggle at curious finds,' fastening on the unassimilable strangeness of individual items like the 'withered hand' or the 'mutilated teeth' (*TM*, 13, 15). By making long lists of exhibits without presuming any connection between them and delighting in

the objects in themselves, the poem treats the museum not as a site of cultural authority but as a 'chaotic pile of souvenirs' (*TM*, 14). But the poem historicizes and demystifies the Pitt-Rivers system of classification in more direct ways. Encountering the artefacts closer to home along with the 'primitive' art and idols – a jay's feather worn as a charm or a dowser's twig, for example – the poem concludes that 'We cannot either feel that we have come / Far or in any particular direction.' (*TM*, 14). Although the narrator states sardonically that 'you have come upon the fabled lands where myths / Go when they die' (*TM*, 14), then, there is a recognition that the museum's aims are more momentous and sinister than the merely archaeological.

This concern about the ways in which different versions of the past can be written and rewritten is continued in Fenton's next full-length collection, *The Memory of War and Children in Exile*, where many of the poems use his own experiences as a foreign correspondent as raw material. Fenton's war reportage and travel writing from this period has received some sharp criticism. Benedict Anderson, for example, links Fenton with a slick, fashionable sphere of *Granta* celebrity journalism, accusing him of 'political tourism' and of being 'a creature of the media [whose] travels to exotic politics are aimed at the acquisition of slides which will be salable on the mass market for the vicarious *frissons* they offer to consumers'.⁵ Douglas Kerr's more sympathetic evaluation of Fenton's prose writing concedes that Fenton is always 'the often bewildered hero and *eirón* of the reportage, in the roles of tourist, dandy, adventurer, journalist, and fool'.⁶ In part, this is because Fenton uses New Journalism techniques which place him squarely at the centre of the action, employing sometimes humorous incidental detail – as in his description of the mass looting of the Presidential Palace in Manila, when he plays Bach's Prelude in C on Ferdinand Marcos's grand piano and steals Imelda's monogrammed towels – and an occasionally slick turn of phrase (in one dispatch, Fenton goes sightseeing in the Philippines because he is 'revolutioned out'). As with Auden, a somewhat romanticized aura of the male, class-privileged Oxford eccentric surrounds Fenton the traveller, a persona reinforced by Redmond O'Hanlon's popular travel book, *Into the Heart of Borneo*, which positions Fenton as the unflappable Englishman abroad, engrossed in the works of Victor Hugo and Jonathan Swift as his canoe negotiates the rapids and the crocodiles in the tropical jungle interior.⁸

Fenton's poetry on these subjects, however, is markedly different. One of his early pieces, 'Letter to John Fuller', slyly satirizes the confessional poetry of mainly American poets (Berryman, Lowell, Sexton), and its emphasis on suicidal states, championed by Al Alvarez in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ This distrust of what he sees as romantic self-absorption means that Fenton tends to steer clear of the uncomplicated first person in his poems. Another distinctive feature of his poetry is that, while his war reportage is often consciously immediate and impressed with 'the weight of the moment, the privilege of being a witness',¹⁰ his war poetry (as the title of his second volume suggests)

usually deals with the painful and inevitably more complex process of remembrance and mourning. A key poem is the one which opens the collection, 'A German Requiem', which concerns the efforts of the vanquished power to come to terms with the experience of the Second World War. In fact, history here appears to be so traumatic as to be not only unspeakable but unthinkable, erased from the memory:

It is not your memories which haunt you.
It is not what you have written down.
It is 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.¹¹

This 'solemn pact between the survivors' to 'forget the old times' is sanctioned by the post-war German political and religious establishment: 'The mayor has signed it on behalf of the freemasonry. / The priest has sealed it on behalf of all the rest.' (MOW, 13). But the poem is also about the persistence of historical memory, if only because the absence of victory parades and other symbolic forms of commemoration in Germany means that a necessary process of grieving has never taken place:

But when so many had died, so many and at such speed,
There were no cities waiting for the victims.
They unscrewed the name-plates from the shattered doorways
And carried them away with the coffins. (MOW, 15)

The narrator thus concedes that 'Grief must have its term? Guilt too, then.' (MOW, 18). However, the ending of the poem, in which the narrator interviews an old German couple, reinforces its initial sense of 'the resourcefulness of recollection' (MOW, 18). These survivors from the war show him a priest-hole, and may thus be Jews who escaped from the concentration camps by hiding from the Nazis, but they are less than forthcoming about their experiences. The narrator is charmed by the 'secret smile' that 'passes from chair to chair' and 'forgets to pursue the point'. The poem thus concludes with a mirroring of the opening lines: 'It is not what he wants to know. / It is what he wants not to know.' (MOW, 19).

Fenton's poems about Southeast Asia, which form a sizeable portion of the collection, continue to develop these themes, although here the process of recollection tends to be privileged over the original experience of war. When Fenton arrived in Indochina in 1973, the situation there was tortuously convoluted: the regimes remaining in Phnom Penh and Saigon after the Paris Peace Conference were extremely fragile and each country had a complicated ethnic mix and fractious internal politics, largely as a consequence of a Byzantine colonial inheritance. (As Benedict Anderson points out, Southeast

Asia is unusual in consisting of areas governed by virtually all the main colonial powers – Britain, France, Holland, Spain, Portugal and the US.¹²) In his introduction to his collected travel writing, Fenton admits to choosing Indochina ‘partly on a whim’, having read a few books but knowing little of the place, and suggests that his revolutionary politics merged with a more basic touristic urge: ‘I wanted very much to see a communist victory [in Vietnam]. I wanted to see a war and the fall of a city because ... because I wanted to see what such things are like.’¹³ If this comment represents Fenton’s views at the start of his travels around the war zone, many of his poems about Indochina concern the acquisition of new knowledges and the agonizing process of re-evaluation attendant upon them.

One example of this is found in ‘Dead Soldiers,’ a piece of poetry-cum-reportage constructed (so the poem seems to suggest) from Fenton’s own diary entries. It tells of a bizarre encounter in Cambodia in which the poet is invited by one of the Norodom family, a nephew of Prince Sihanouk, for ‘lunch on the battlefield’ (*MOW*, 26). Sat between Norodom and his aide, who turns out to be the estranged brother of Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot), he is served a lavish meal of frogs’ legs, pregnant turtles and banana salad, as the APCs ‘fired into the sugar palms’ (*MOW*, 27). The description of the frogs’ thighs leaping one by one into the ‘sad purple face’ of the drunken aide, who everyone treats as the ‘club bore’ (*MOW*, 27), seems to encapsulate what Hannah Arendt has called ‘the banality of evil’.¹⁴ 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’ (*MOW*, 26) – deceives the narrator into believing that he knows how to read the 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:

... we were always wrong in these predictions.
It was a family war. Whatever happened,
The principals were obliged to attend its issue. (*MOW*, 28)

The protagonists he imagines to be ordinarily corrupt and debauched turn out to be fanatically dedicated to their cause, and he proves even more misguided in his views of their enemies: of Pol Pot he remembers ‘nothing more than an obscure reputation for virtue’ (*MOW*, 28).

Fenton’s poetry thus revisits the Western anti-Stalinist Left’s dilemma in the 1960s and 1970s concerning Indochina’s problematic amalgam of Marxism and Nationalism. As a member of the Trotskyist International Socialists, Fenton was anti-nationalistic, but pragmatically in favour of movements of national liberation against American imperialism. He supported but did not

idealize the VietCong and Khmer Rouge, claiming to have learnt a lesson from the 1930s in seeking not to ‘invent victories for the comrades’. But although Fenton admired the disciplined way in which the VietCong took Saigon at the time, he later accuses himself of ‘political opportunism’ in seeking to ‘hitch a ride on the winning tank, just a few yards before the palace gates,’ and admits that he later ‘gr[ew] to loathe the *apparatchiks* who were arriving everyday with their cardboard suitcases from Hanoi’.¹⁵ If Fenton retrospectively qualifies his sympathy for the Vietcong, he comes to regret even more deeply his support for the Khmer Rouge. In his introduction to the autobiography of one of his Cambodian friends, Someth May, Fenton states that the foreign press card held by his Cambodian colleagues became ‘a death certificate’ after the fall of Phnom Penh. But Fenton himself, along with other Western journalists, had dissuaded them from leaving Cambodia, perhaps partly because many on the political left feared the news of atrocities perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge were a propagandistic tool: ‘Some people indeed foresaw utter disaster, but a large body of opinion held that the end of the war would be a relief. For one reason or another, many of us mourn friends whom we could well have saved.’¹⁶ This comment seems to suggest that Fenton himself might be the ‘one man’ mentioned in ‘Cambodia’:

One man shall smile one day and say goodbye.
Two shall be left, two shall be left to die.

One man shall give his best advice.
Three men shall pay the price.

One man shall live, live to regret.
Four men shall meet the debt.

One man shall wake from terror to his bed.
Five men shall be dead. (MOW, 23)

This process of re-examination is continued in other poems in the collection. The first half of ‘In a Notebook,’ written within the conventions of pastoral, represents the notebook entries of the title. These italicized stanzas paint a lyrical portrait of a pre-Year Zero Cambodia, remembering a village on the banks of ‘a river overhung with trees,’ where young boys fished, women washed and families cooked Chinese soup on charcoal stoves in houseboats. The ‘pleasant war’ intrudes only momentarily, as ‘shy soldiers setting out for battle / Asked for a cigarette and laughed a little.’ (MOW, 24). The poem ends, however, with a two-stanza reappraisal in normal type which repeats but inverts many of the phrases in the first part of the poem, and in which a present-tense narrator appears to be looking over these notebook entries and reflecting on the Khmer Rouge’s destruction of the village:

And the tide turned and brought me to my senses.
The pleasant war brought the unpleasant answers.

The villages are burnt, the cities void;
The morning light has left the river view
And I'm afraid, reading this passage now,
That everything I knew has been destroyed
By those whom I admired but never knew;
The laughing soldiers fought to their defeat
And I'm afraid most of my friends are dead. (MOW, 25)

'Children in Exile,' the longest and most ambitious of Fenton's Cambodian poems, is an account of young refugees from Pol Pot's regime after their arrival in Italy. The poem echoes 'A German Requiem' in its concern with the unavoidable working through of historical trauma, which happens irrespective of geographical location:

They have found out: it is hard to escape from Cambodia,
Hard to escape the justice of Pol Pot,
When they are called to report in dreams to their tormentors.
One night is merciful, the next is not. (MOW, 30)

The narrator of this poem, who befriends the refugees and takes them to the Leaning Tower and the Campo Santo at Pisa, is more than a mere neutral observer. His 'enlightened' Western eyes blame the West (and more specifically, the US) for their suffering, and he pities their naive faith in 'Mother America,' claiming bitterly that they have been released on parole 'from five years of punishment for an offence / It took America five years to commit.' (MOW, 35, 30). But however much he tries to encompass imaginatively these children's experiences, he also comes to realize that his sense of righteousness is the luxury of the outsider, since the complexities of international power politics are beyond its victims. After all that they have been through, they only know 'what they do not want. / Better the owl before dawn than the devil by day.' (MOW, 36). In fact, it is the narrator, as well as these children, who must begin to let go of the experience of war by learning to accept their trust in the West: 'it is we, not they, who cannot forgive America, / And it is we who travel, they who flee.' (MOW, 35). The poem ends on an accommodating note, the narrator reconciled to the 'negative ambition' of the children to escape to the US: 'Let them dream as they wish to dream. Let them dream / Of Jesus, America, Maths, lego, music and dance.' (MOW, 35, 37).

It is notable that, in *The Memory of War*, Fenton tends to favour the use of closed forms which means that, as Ian Gregson puts it, there is a 'gap between the manner and register of his war poems on the one hand and their violent content on the other'.¹⁷ For example, as befits a writer whose favourite poem is Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard,' 'Children in

Exile' and 'In a Notebook' are both written in slightly varying iambic pentameter. As Antony Easthope points out, the 'syntagmatic closure promoted by the pentameter can approximate to a poise and self-consistency that seems absolute'.¹⁸ It is true that there is a sense in these poems of horror recollected in tranquillity which is more than simply an effect of their content as memories of war. There is a risk that, as Stan Smith puts it in a different context, the poem might thus appear to 'reconcile the historical anxiety of its genesis with the utopian bliss of its reading,' giving us a false sense that the nightmarish historical world might be somehow salvaged and rehabilitated through the individual sensibility of the poet.¹⁹ What, I think, saves these poems from such a notion is their strenuous avoidance of any kind of autobiographical sentimentality. Although it is possible to piece together a continuous Fenton-like narrator in his poetry from his own comments about the war, the poems themselves, when read without these external clues, make few concessions to the reader and are more ambiguous and unsettling. In 'A German Requiem,' for example, a disembodied and anonymous narrator addresses an equally unspecified 'they' and 'you,' and other characters in the poem tend to be referred to collectively and identified indistinctly as 'boiled shirts' or 'leering waistcoats' (*MOW*, 13). In fact, it is only really the title which gives the subject away – when the poem was first published as 'Elegy,' it generally baffled readers. In part, this may be an effect of Fenton's writing technique, which tends to pare down an initial experience to its bare essentials – he describes his poems as 'more rooted in specific experience than would be apparent,' because 'there's been an editing technique to make the experience seem strange'.²⁰ In producing this confusion in the reader, Fenton creates a sense of historical and psychoanalytical complexity which disrupts the sometimes elegiac effect of the verse forms he employs.

Fenton returns to the subject of Cambodia in 'Out of the East,' a long middle-section on Far and Middle Eastern Politics in his latest collection, *Out of Danger*, which includes poems on the Tiananmen Square massacre, the *Intifada* in the Israeli-occupied territories in 1987 and the Fundamentalist revolution in Iran. These poems are as pessimistic as those in *The Memory of War*, but here they seem to screen the historical turmoil they describe behind a range of verbal effects – insistent rhythms, inventive rhymes and word play. (In fact, the musicality has a specific purpose: these verses form the words to a 'pocket musical' performed in Paris in 1990.) The title poem in 'Out of the East' is a ballad, with the verses narrated by a teenage Khmer Rouge soldier who describes the rebel army's long journey along the 'paddy track' from the jungles in the Thai border region to Phnom Penh. These verses are interrupted by a repetitive chorus:

Out of the South came Famine.
Out of the West came Strife.
Out of the North came a storm cone

And out of the East came a warrior wind
And it struck you like a knife.²¹

As this chorus is modified ('Out of the North came an army ... out of the South came a gun crew ... Out of the West came Napalm' (OOD, 30)), it becomes clear that the poem is discussing the different factions at war in Cambodia – Lon Nol's troops, the Khmer Rouge, the North and South Vietnamese and the US, which invaded in 1970 and engaged in sporadic bombing between 1969 and 1973. But the use of compass points rather than specific regions means that there are few clues here as to what exactly is being referred to, an inscrutability which pervades the whole poem. This, for example, is the economical way in which Fenton describes the Khmer Rouge's installation of Prince Sihanouk (its former enemy) as a puppet for the ruthless regime led by Pol Pot:

We have brought the king home to his palace.
We shall leave him there to weep
And we'll go back along the paddy track
For we have promises to keep.

For the promise made in the foxhole,
For the oath in the temple yard,
For the friend I killed on the battlefield
I shall make that punishment hard. (OOD, 32)

Because the poem is narrated by one of the perpetrators of these atrocities – a Khmer Rouge soldier who is driven by the persuasiveness of his superiors and the exigencies of war to kill his former friends and allies – there is little opportunity for moral outrage here, just a general sense of violence as breeding violence and the desire for revenge. In the end, all the poem can urge the reader to do is 'cry for the war that can do this thing' (OOD, 29).

Another poem in the form of a story, 'The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah,' recounts the Ayatollah Khomeini's life from his exile from Iran in 1964 up to the Iran-Iraq war. The poem's subtitle, however, is 'An Old Persian Legend' and it begins with the caveat that

All this was many centuries ago –
The kind of thing that couldn't happen now –
When Persia was the empire of the Shah
And many were the furrows on his brow. (OOD, 35)

The language used here (as throughout the poem) is deceptively simple and child-like, almost as though it is covering up a brutal truth which would be too hard to bear if related in more conventional vocabulary. The archaic references to Persia, Babylon and Persepolis in the poem also seem to function

as a device which distances the reader from the historical immediacy of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, although they may also be designed to point to the enduring nature of these conflicts. The poem ends:

The song is yours. Arrange it as you will.
Remember where each word fits in the line
And every combination will be true
And every permutation will be fine:

From policy to felony to fear
From litany to heresy to fire
From villainy to tyranny to war
From tyranny to dynasty to shame (OOD, 37–38)

The expiatory tone of Fenton's earlier Cambodian poems has given way here to a kind of nihilism. Either these lines (the italicized ones functioning as a chorus throughout the poem) suggest the complete absence of meaning – every interpretation of the poem is true – or they imply that the overthrow of despotism only ever succeeds in producing tyranny of a different kind. Again, the emphasis is on the way that violence reproduces itself: 'The child who saw his father's killer killed / Has slaughtered half the children in the land.' (OOD, 37).

This deep historical cynicism recurs in 'Jerusalem,' a poem dated December 1988, placing it exactly a year after the beginning of the Palestinian riots in the Gaza strip and West Bank which produced an armed response from Israeli forces claiming nearly a thousand lives. Puzzlingly, though, having placed itself so precisely, the poem does not refer explicitly to these events. It is made up of a cacophony of opposing voices of different factions of 'warrior archaeologists,' each claiming the city as theirs: 'This is us and that is them. / This is Jerusalem.' (OOD, 21). Who 'us' and 'them' are is never precisely spelled out, although the references to Golgotha, Gethsemane, the Emperor Hadrian and the Holy Sepulchre seem to place the tension between Israel and its Arab neighbours in the wider context of the conflict between Muslims, Christians and Jews over the last two millennia. It is clear that Jerusalem's symbolic meaning is more significant than the geographical reality of the city itself:

Jerusalem itself is on the move.
It leaps and leaps from hill to hill
And as it makes it way it also makes it will. (OOD, 19)

The misunderstandings described in the poem are cumulative, the result of arguments embedded deep in history and the refusal on both sides to recognize the discrete histories of their enemies:

My history is proud.
 Mine is not allowed.
 This is the cistern where all wars begin,
 The laughter from the armoured car.
 This is the man who won't believe you're what you are. (OOD, 18)

If there is a connecting theme in Fenton's poetry, then, it is his suspicion of any kind of fanaticism, either religious or political, which supposes the achievement of a perfectible world, and indeed his general distrust of progressivist views of history. Although Fenton may have been initially motivated by Marxism, a more relevant link might thus be made here with the work of Walter Benjamin, whose angel of history has his face forever 'turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.'²² Fenton's reassessment of his own teleological conception of Third World revolution in his poetry, in fact, anticipates a critique of orthodox Marxist views of decolonization by certain post-colonial critics. Edward Said, for example, has criticized Marx's analysis of British rule in India for being 'Romantic and even messianic: as human material the Orient is less important than as an element in a Romantic redemptive project'.²³ Robert Young agrees that 'Marxism's universalizing narrative of the unfolding of a rational system of world history is simply a negative form of the history of European imperialism,' representing a kind of 'neo-colonialism'.²⁴

Whether or not one agrees with these arguments, they provide a useful insight into Fenton's poetry, much of which is concerned with the problems of imposing a Western dialectic on a uniquely non-Western situation. A similar change of direction is evident, of course, in Auden's war poetry in the 1930s. In the Spanish Civil War, he appeared to have found an arena in which poetry could help to 'make action more urgent and its nature more clear',²⁵ most obviously demonstrated in the exhortations of 'Spain,' with its refrain, 'to-day the struggle'.²⁶ By the time of his journey to the Sino-Japanese war in 1938, however, these historical certainties had deserted Auden. His sonnet sequence and verse commentary 'In Time of War' is anything but a call to arms, despite his sympathy for the Chinese after the invasion of Manchuria. Here 'history opposes its grief to our buoyant song,' continually reaffirming the survival of tyranny: 'The mountains cannot judge us when we lie: / We dwell upon the earth; the earth obeys / The intelligent and evil till they die.'²⁷

Although Auden can hardly be said to be innocent of the charge of political tourism (one of his reasons for going to China, he told Christopher Isherwood, was that it wouldn't be 'crowded with star literary observers ... we'll have a war all of our very own'²⁸), there is at least a sense in 'In Time of War,' as Samuel Hynes points out, of China forming the breeding-ground for a wider conflict of which Europe is also a part.²⁹ Fenton's war poetry, though,

never suggests this kind of involvement of the poet or the reader in the conflicts described, because it remains exclusively foreign. Indeed, apart from the early, satirical 'Letter to Richard Crossman' written for a *New Statesman* competition, Fenton's homegrown poems are confined to love poetry, light verse or other poems on domestic themes. In presenting the past and present of Asia and the Middle East as one of perpetual bloodshed, chaos and despotism, then, he risks reproducing what Said calls 'the imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient"'.³⁰

This is partly reinforced by the fact that his poetry gives away so little – the sheer lack of information can seem like a refusal to interrogate specific contexts. Arjuna Parakrama picks up on one example in 'Jerusalem,' where the obliqueness of the poem means that an apparent reference to the *Intifada* ('Ill stone you. I shall break your every limb. / Oh I am not afraid of you / But maybe I should fear the things you make me do' (OOD, 19)) misrepresents the riots, implicitly referring to the stonethrowing of the Palestinians but not to the use of guns by Israeli troops. The events on the ground are thus

completely obliterated by a poem that places the writer as one who has the luxury of being uninvolved, or, worse still, involved in an entirely different (touristic?) enterprise ... the poet's ability to literally divorce and isolate Jerusalem from the urgent and catastrophic political realities of the area is symptomatic of the unquestioned privilege that he enjoys as classed-generated-raced-regioned outsider.³¹

I am not sure, however, if the poem 'means' anything definite enough to be described as openly anti-Palestinian. The nub of the issue might be that in the later poems from *Out of Danger*, Fenton combines his historical and political concerns with another area of interest, the nonsense verse and verbal pyrotechnics exemplified in the co-authored *Partingtime Hall* (1987). When dealing with tragic events in this way, he leaves himself open to the charge of lack of seriousness and 'dandyism, which I know is my besetting sin'.³²

I am reluctant to dismiss so readily, though, a contemporary poet who has done much to undermine the popular idea of poetry as being 'of all literary genres the most apparently sealed from history, the one where "sensibility" may play in its purest, least socially tainted form'.³³ Fenton's problem is partly the sheer difficulty of representing at all the horrific events he describes in his poetry. Theodor Adorno notoriously declared that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,' although it is worth noting that he was referring to a particular kind of poetry, one of 'self-satisfied contemplation' which could never be equal to the challenge of the 'absolute reification' of totalitarian society.³⁴ (Adorno also later qualified his original statement by saying that '*literature must resist this verdict* . . . It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it . . . it is to works of art that has fallen the burden

of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics.³⁵) In its subject matter, Fenton's poetry clearly does resist such a verdict, and his comments on poetry as a whole – his declared commitment to the narrative function of verse, 'obviousness' and 'extrinsic interest'³⁶ – make it clear that his aim is far from self-satisfied contemplation. However, he also says that he 'never believed in *agitprop* ... There are certain things you can say in poetry but what you can't do with poetry is allow political ends to dictate your aesthetics.'³⁷ In the 'Manila Manifesto,' a statement of intent in verse which concludes *Out of Danger*, Fenton seems to favour the idea of the poem *as a poem*, a verbal contraction to be read, spoken and heard: 'the wisdom of our age has forbidden us the use of our lips and our limbs. This wisdom is the enemy of poetry.' (OOD, 82).

These statements clearly point to a tension in Fenton's poetry between its historical groundedness and its overt literariness, its borrowing of a whole range of poetic styles and genres. As I have attempted to show in this article, this tension raises a number of issues about the representation of traumatic historical events in poetry which is dense and technically sophisticated. In Fenton's work, in particular, this means that he sometimes fails to interrogate adequately his own position as a First World observer of post-colonial conflict. But when his poetry is taken as a whole, the accusation of dilettantish posturing and voyeurism which has been levelled against him seems unfair. He has clearly thought deeply about his own changing relationship to the events he describes, while the 'difficulty' of the poems and their avoidance of any obvious position-taking stems partly from his refusal to provide easy answers to recalcitrant historical problems, dramatizing the difficulties of political commitment in relation to the complicated after-effects of colonialism. The problems of historical representation thus function as productive tensions within Fenton's work, allowing him to combine technical inventiveness with a historically informed subject matter in a way which is rare in contemporary poetry.

Notes

1 James Fenton, *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of the Pacific Rim* (New York, 1988), p. 6.

2 Mark Wormald, 'Journey Without Maps: An Interview with James Fenton,' *Oxford Poetry*, 6:1 (1991), p. 13.

3 James Fenton, *Terminal Moraine* (London, 1972), p. 29. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Hereafter *TM*, with page numbers in brackets.

4 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995), p. 186.

5 Benedict Anderson, 'James Fenton's Slideshow,' *New Left Review*, 158 (1986), 81–82.

6 Douglas Kerr, 'Orientations: James Fenton and Indochina,' *Contemporary Literature*, 35:3 (1994), 484.

7 Fenton, *All the Wrong Places*, p. 206.

8 Redmond O'Hanlon, *Into the Heart of Borneo: An Account of a Journey Made in 1983 to the Mountains of Batu Tiban with James Fenton* (Harmondsworth, 1985).

9 See, for example, Al Alvarez, 'Beyond the Gentility Principle,' in Al Alvarez (ed.), *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth, revised ed., 1966), pp. 21–32, and Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London, 1971).

10 Fenton, *All the Wrong Places*, p. 86.

11 James Fenton, *The Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems, 1968–1983* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 11. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Hereafter MOW, with page numbers in brackets.

12 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, revised ed., 1991), p. xv.

13 Fenton, *All the Wrong Places*, pp. 3, 11, 6.

14 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, 1963).

15 Fenton, *All the Wrong Places*, pp. 106, 104.

16 James Fenton, 'Introduction' in Someth May, *Cambodian Witness: The Autobiography of Someth May*, ed. James Fenton (London, 1986), p. 12.

17 Ian Gregson, 'James Fenton: Expert at Cross-Fertilization' in *idem*, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 75.

18 Antony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London, 1983), p. 72.

19 Stan Smith, *W. H. Auden* (Oxford, 1985), p. 5.

20 Andrew Motion, 'An Interview with James Fenton,' *Poetry Review*, 72:2 (1982), 20–21.

21 James Fenton, *Out of Danger* (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 27. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Hereafter OOD, with page numbers in brackets.

22 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *idem*, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (London, 1973), p. 259.

23 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth, revised ed., 1985), p. 154.

24 Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London, 1990), pp. 2, 112.

25 W. H. Auden, 'Introduction,' in W. H. Auden and John Garrett (eds), *The Poet's Tongue* (London, 1935), p. ix.

26 W. H. Auden, 'Spain,' in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 1979), pp. 51–55.

27 W. H. Auden, 'In Time of War,' in W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London, 1939), pp. 271–72, 293.

28 Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and his Kind* (New York, 1976), p. 289, cited in Douglas Kerr, 'Disorientations: Auden and Isherwood's China,' *Literature and History*, 3rd ser., 5:2 (1996), 53.

29 Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (Princeton, 1976), p. 347.

30 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 26.

31 Arjuna Parakrama, 'The Art of (W)riting Oneself Out of Danger: Review of *Out of Danger*,' *Critical Quarterly*, 36:2 (1994), 112–13.

32 Fenton quoted in Ian Parker, 'Auden's Heir,' *New Yorker*, 25 July 1994, p. 65.

33 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2nd edition, 1996), p. 44.

34 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge, MA, 1981), p. 34.

35 Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment,' in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhart (eds),

The Essential Frankfurt Reader (New York, 1982), pp. 312, 318, cited in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London, 1992), p. 34.

36 See, for example, James Fenton, 'The Manifesto against Manifestos,' *Poetry Review*, 73:3 (1983), p. 14; James Fenton, 'Ars Poetica 12: Extrinsic Interest', *Independent on Sunday*, 15 April 1990, *Sunday Review*, p. 19.

37 Grevel Lindop, 'James Fenton in Conversation,' *PN Review*, 11:2 (1984), p. 31.

Address for Correspondence

Joe Moran, Department of Literature and Cultural History, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool L1 7BR, UK, e-mail: j.moran@livjm.ac.uk