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"Stick with me and i'll take you there" : the speaker and history in the poetry of James Fenton

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"STICK WITH ME AND I'LL TAKE YOU THERE": THE SPEAKER AND HISTORY IN THE POETRY OF JAMES FENTON¹

James Fenton is a successful, highly regarded contemporary British poet. His work has been discussed with enthusiasm by such major commentators as Michael Schmidt and Peter Levi.² Levi, indeed, compares him to Aeschylus and to the major German poet Peter Huchel. Fenton won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize for his poetry in 1984 and was elected Oxford University Professor of Poetry in 1994. His output includes a wide range of different kinds of poetry – love lyrics, songs, found poems, poems with a clear political-historical subject matter, literary-social satire, and ballads.³ The following essay analyses three very different poems – different in terms of genre, metrical features, use of rhyme, language, and subject matter – which are themselves substantial texts worthy of attention, and also ones which indicate certain common features of Fenton's poetry, above all with regard to the speaker, his relationship to history and the nature of that history.

1

"A German Requiem" (1981) is a poem composed of nine short poems revolving round figures and experiences from post-Second World War German history and society.⁴ The first of these nine poems clearly sounds

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared in Polish in *Eseje o współczesnej poezji brytyjskiej i irlandzkiej*. Ed. David Malcolm. Gdańsk, University of Gdańsk Press 2002, p. 126–141.

² Michael Schmidt, *Reading Modern Poetry*. London and New York, Routledge 1989, p. 25; Peter Levi, *The Art of Poetry: The Oxford Lectures 1984–1989*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1991, p. 27–28, 35–37.

³ This is noted in: Neil Corcoran, James Fenton. In: *Contemporary Poets*. Fifth edition. Ed. Tracy Chevalier. Chicago and London, St James Press 1991, p. 294.

⁴ James Fenton, *The Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems 1968–1983*. Harmondsworth, Penguin 1983, p. 9–19.

a dominant note in the group as a whole, both in terms of motif (forgetting and remembering) and of language (the pattern established here – "It is not what..." – is repeated in the last section of the sequence as a conclusion to the whole text).

The title of the sequence – "A German Requiem" – is immediately striking. It promises a certain breadth of scope (an English poem on German matters!), and also carries with it the suggestion that it may be about some of the darker aspects of European history. A requiem itself is a text praying for the repose of the dead, and, thus, automatically marks the poem as being of some seriousness, containing an element of mourning. It also indicates a rootedness in traditional forms and genres (to which the requiem belongs), and this is borne out in the statements and counter-statements, the antiphonal parallelisms of the text itself, recalling as they do the statements and responses of a religious ritual.

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 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.

You will find that you are not alone in the enterprise.

Yesterday the very furniture seemed to reproach you.

Today you take your place in the Widow's Shuttle.

This first poem of the sequence is (like the rest of the group) written in unrhymed verse. It contains 11 lines, with a wide variety of main stresses per line (from 3 to 6). Again this flexibility in line length is common throughout the whole sequence, and allows for a variety of effects, from the ritualistic to the conversational. This opening poem is further marked by the way in which each line is end-stopped, and, indeed, ends in a period. The majority of lines consist of one completed, graphical sentence, although some lines contain two sentences. Not all these sentences are strictly grammatical sentences, line 7 – "What you must go on forgetting all your life" – being an elliptical version of the previous line with "It is" omitted. The effect of this type of end-stopping is peculiar and difficult to analyse, but it is as if the separate sentences gain a force and discrete prominence through it, a sense of austere clarity.

But it is the prominence of repetitions and parallelisms beyond the arrangement of the lines which strikes the reader forcibly.⁵ The first 7 lines are organised round an array of devices of repetition and parallelism. Anaphora gives shape to lines 1 and 2 – "It is not what..."/ "It is what..."; "It is

⁵ The discussion here and in what follows draws substantially on the discussion of a variety of matters of poetic technique considered in Geoffrey Leech's classic study *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London, Longman 1969.

not..."/ "It is...". In addition, line 2 concludes with the epistrophe "the houses"/ "the houses." Line 3 is an example of symploce, that is both initial and final repetition, while lines 4 and 5 begin with anaphora. The same device is apparent in the next two lines through the repeated "what" and the elliptical presence of the implied "It is." These two lines are further shaped by yet another paralleling device, that of polyptoton, the repetition of a word with varying grammatical inflections – thus: "forgotten," "forget," "forgetting." The presence of these devices obviously carries substantial meaning within the text. They serve to emphasise very strongly the motifs of memory and forgetting which they contain, but they also embody a kind of ritual repetitiveness, and one which, further, builds up to a climax. The "It is"/ "It is" pattern is repeated over 6 lines, only to vary in lines 6 and 7 to an elliptical, hidden repetition, which also builds to a climax by the modifications of "forget" in those lines. The antiphonies of the requiem culminate in line 7.

The compositional division of the introductory poem is emphasised through this climax, as it is through the absence of the same density of parallel phrases in the concluding four lines of the text. Here only the last two lines – "Yesterday...", "Today..." – provide a relatively weak syntactic parallelism. In addition, the language of the two sections of the poem (lines 1-7 and lines 8-11) also shifts in terms of formality, the first section being markedly informal and the second substantially more formal. The unspecified deixis of the "It is" which shapes the first 7 lines belongs to very informal speech and writing (it really means something like "what is important is" or "it's all a matter of"), while a phrase such as "oblivion should discover a ritual" or words such as "enterprise" and "reproach" are clearly much more formal. The direct, forceful simplicity of the first seven lines modulates into a more elaborate, a more evasive language, just as one might seek to cover guilt in fine phrases.⁶

If the deixis of the "It" that runs through the first 7 lines is in a strict sense obscure, this is true of other pronouns too throughout the whole poem. Who are the "they" of line 1? And who is the "you" of the remainder of the text? Why does one modulate into the other? Further, is the "you" a concrete person, an addressee of the poem, or is it the equivalent of the general "one," or does it, indeed, shift from the latter to the former in the course of the poem, perhaps around line 7? The very ambiguity is central, appropriate to the deceptive forgetting that runs throughout the poem, but also perhaps broadening out the poem's focus. "They" and "you" are involved, but perhaps also "one" and "us."

Although the addressee is ambiguous, the speaker is quite precisely configured. The voice is marked by the kind of traditional linguistic virtuosity noted above – rhetorical vigour in the parallelisms and climax of the first 7 lines, the informal force of the language in those lines, and then the sophistication

⁶ Michael Schmidt writes of this language that it "mimes the deliberate, 'official' forgetting of a past not by an individual but by a society" (Schmidt, op. cit. p. 25).

of lexis in the last four. The speaker is also a knowing one. He knows what has vanished; he knows what is to be forgotten. He also knows what will happen: you will probably not be the only one trying to forget; you will overcome your guilt and join the others. He knows what is in your mind – that in the past "the very furniture seemed to reproach you." He also possesses an amount of rather obscure information about the world: he knows what "the Widow's Shuttle" is. (This is usually glossed as one of the buses which at one time took German war-widows to visit graveyards, but the actual denotation of the metaphor is not necessarily the most important issue, but rather the shaping of the speaker as a possessor of specialised knowledge.) This configuration of the speaker lasts throughout the entire "Requiem." He shows himself consistently knowledgeable, in command of details of family histories as well as of national catastrophes, of collective as well as of individual dishonesties. However, in the last section of the "Requiem" the speaker is revealed as also willing to forget, as, indeed, wishing to forget. Although he speaks of "the enquirer" here, this figure may be close to himself, and, thus, he too becomes implicated in the conspiracy of forgetting that is the poem's subject. "He forgets to pursue the point. / It is not what he wants to know. / It is what he wants not to know." As Dana Gioia notes, "like many of Fenton's extended poems, 'A German Requiem' can seem almost impenetrable unless the reader accepts the open evasiveness of its narrator."⁷

The world that the speaker has such easy knowledge of is both private and public. It is the world of people's hidden feelings, "memories," the reproaches of the furniture, but it is also a world of history and politics, the houses that have been knocked down, the streets that no longer exist. In the context of the poem's title, this presumably refers to a mid-twentieth German history of the seizure of Jewish property, the massive bombing of cities by the Allies, and the changing street names that reflect the different political regimes between the 1930s and the 1950s. The "memories" which haunt, which must be forgotten are presumably, too, those of complicity with a murderous regime. Indeed, even the private "furniture" which reproaches the addressee could be readily construed as the furniture of murdered victims or opponents of the regimes (the Polish phrase *mienie pożydowskie* would be appropriate here). The "Widow's Shuttle" is carrying war-widows, not those whose husbands have died of natural causes. As Corcoran writes, "The impression his poems most profoundly convey is that what can be learned about the world is infinitely more important than what can be learned about the self; and the 'world' in Fenton's case means rather more of it than is the case with many contemporary English poets."⁸ And this world has apocalyptic elements. Houses have vanished; whole streets no longer exist. Later in the "Requiem" we learn of squares and parks "filled with the

⁷ Dana Gioia, *James Fenton. In: Poets of Great Britain and Ireland since 1960*. Ed. Vincent B. Sherry, Jr. Detroit, Brucoli Clark/Gale Research 1985, p. 126.

⁸ Corcoran, *op. cit.* p. 294.

eloquence of young cemeteries" "when so many had died, so many and at such speed." One of the agents or victims of this history certainly perceives it as apocalypse. The cataclysm of mid-century German history is seen as a time "When the world was at its darkest, / When the black wings passed over the rooftops" – with echoes of Exodus 12 and Revelation 6.12 and 8.

2

I saw a child with silver hair.
Stick with me and I'll take you there.
 Clutch my hand.
 Don't let go.
The fields are mined and the wind blows cold.
The wind blows through his silver hair.

The title of the poem "I Saw a Child" (from Fenton's collection *Out of Danger* published in 1993) suggests precisely the opposite of what the text is.⁹ It promises, perhaps, a Romantic poem on childhood innocence, on a child's freedom from civilised corruption and its consequent perceptiveness like Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" or "We Are Seven". It might also indicate a Christian hymn, again drawing on the symbol of the child as innocent and yet, by virtue of that innocence, wise (one thinks of Blake's "Songs of Innocence" here). But one is rapidly disabused. The second line of the poem begins with the cynical and knowing "Stick with me," and the poem goes on to tell us that the "fields are mined," thus scarcely places for a child to sport and play, or even walk.

But despite its reversal of expectations as one reads beyond the title, "I Saw a Child" is a highly traditional piece of lyric verse. It is, above all, very regular in terms of rhythm and stanza form. It is fundamentally iambic, with an admixture of anapaests, lines 1, 2, 5 and 6 of each stanza being tetrameters and the middle (shorter) two lines in each being dimeters. Several lines do not, in fact, start with a complete iambic foot; they are acephalous or headless lines (or catalectic ones), lacking the opening stressed syllable that would make the initial foot fully iambic. This is not surprising, given the frequency of directive-imperative forms in the poem – "Stick with me," "Clutch my hand," "Don't let go," and so on. The repeated "Far from..." lines that open stanzas 3, 4 and 5 are also inevitably acephalous, in that the first word "far" has to be stressed. Here, as with the directives noted above, metrical deviation is a consequence of phonological word stress and also of the semantic stress that is laid on these words and (in the case of the directives) on their grammatical form. The deviation is, however, well within the norms of traditional English versification. Indeed, the poem carries vague echoes of the rondeau, of the wide variety of six-line stanzas in English

⁹ James Fenton, *Out of Danger*. Harmondsworth, Penguin 1993, p. 39–40.

verse, or of the playful richness of line-length and rhyme schemes that one finds in Donne's Songs and Sonnets ("Goe, and catch a falling starre...", or "The Message," for example).

Stanza lay-out carries meaning with it too. The two shorter lines (lines 3 and 4 of each stanza) are inevitably highlighted, the instructions they give and the questions they ask being foregrounded by the graphical arrangement of lines. The relationship of line to syntax also strikes the reader. As in the opening poem of "A German Requiem," verse line and grammatical sentence usually overlap in "I Saw a Child." In the first two stanzas each line is a sentence; in the remaining three, this is true apart from the first two lines of each stanza, although in each case these two lines form a complete sentence. In "I Saw a Child" (as in "A German Requiem") this technique gives a sense of directness, accessibility, a kind of simple austerity to the text. These are observations pulled from experience which must be given in a clear form; these are instructions which you must follow if you are to survive; they are simple questions ("Is this you?/ Is this me?") which demand that the addressee place himself / herself vis-a-vis the created world of the poem.

Rhyme scheme is predominantly quite regular in "I Saw a Child." In all stanzas lines 1, 2 and 6 rhyme, although in stanza 3 "again" is really an eye-rhyme with "brain" and "pain" rather than a phonological one. In stanzas 1, 3 and 4, lines 4 and 5 rhyme, although in stanza 1 "go" and "cold" are examples of assonance, rather than full rhymes. In stanza 2, "path" and "bright," although graphically very different, almost chime in consonance. However, not even this is true of stanza 5, where lines 3, 4 and 5 stand out by their complete lack of any rhyme. Here foregrounding of the questions these lines contain, and of the dismal summation of "The fields are mined and the night is long" may be the purpose of this marked lack of rhyme.

In "A German Requiem" we noted the prominent use of repetition and parallelism. The same can be observed in "I Saw a Child." Syntactically, the poem is composed of a few repeated patterns. These are:

- (1) "I saw"-type sentences which record the mental experiences of the speaker;
- (2) directives or imperatives giving advice or instructions to the addressee – "Stick with me," for example;
- (3) quasi-factual statements about the world, often (although not always) relational in form – for example, "The fields are mined and the moon is bright";
- (4) questions – of which there are only two towards the poem's end, and which are highlighted by their deviance from the text's syntactic norms (and rhyme scheme).

If syntax is insistently parallel, so too is lexis. It is largely informal to neutral (perhaps only "the wisdom of the brain/ blood/ heart" shifts the formality level a little higher), again – as in "A German Requiem" – achieving a high degree of accessibility for the addressee. Lexis is, however, above all, strikingly repetitive and certain phrases echo throughout the text – "I saw

a child," "Stick with/ to," "The wind blows," "Clutch my hand/ heart," "The fields are mined," "Far from the wisdom," "The Blue Vein River." Syntactic parallelism clearly emphasises certain features of the poem: the speaker has observed specific phenomena; he knows specific things about the world; he has certain instructions to give you, and two very serious questions to put to you. The central features of the world he talks about are made clear through the repeated lexis – the child, the danger of the "fields," the river (which must be crossed?), the necessity of staying close to one's guide ("Stick with me," "Clutch my hand"), the unwisdom, the insanity of the world he talks of. As in "A German Requiem," lexis and syntax here seem to aim at a maximum ease of understanding, a maximum directness and clarity.

Another aspect of the speaker of "I Saw a Child" seems similar to that of the speaker in "A German Requiem." On one level, he, too, seems to be possessed of unusual and privileged knowledge (like the narrator of a Kipling ballad, for example, "The Ballad of East and West"). The parallel syntax of so much of the poem embodies this. The speaker has seen certain things ("I saw a child with silver hair"); he knows about the state of the world ("The fields are mined and the wind blows cold"); and he gives you advice about what to do ("Stick with me and I'll take you there"). He is at least passing himself off as a guide to the dangerous fields that surround the Blue Vein River (itself an item of rather abstruse knowledge – is it a river in Cambodia, say, or a river from an invented landscape?). "Clutch my hand," "Stick to the path," "Stay with me," he urges, especially "when the shooting starts." The knowledge he possesses is specialised and exotic; most British readers of the poem would not, one imagines, know what to do under those circumstances.

But do we trust him? The speaker in "I Saw a Child" is markedly more ambiguous than that in "A German Requiem." On one level, he sometimes fails to rhyme. The deviations from full rhyme noted above – "go / cold," "brain / again" – and the failure to rhyme in stanza 5, might suggest something is not quite right with this speaker. In addition, the rather strange line in stanza 3, "Tell me we may be friends again," might give the reader pause. Why did we stop being friends? Did he lead us astray once before? Indeed, on another level, we must be in some doubt as to who is speaking at certain points in the text, and to whom. Is there one speaker throughout? There is certainly no punctuation to suggest otherwise, but neither is there in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (where there are two speakers). Who says "Clutch my hand," and gives all the other instructions to stay close? Could it be the child? And if there is one speaker, whom is he addressing – the child, an unspecified addressee ("Is this you?/ Is this me?"), or sometimes one, sometimes the other? And if it is the child, we come back to the disturbing "Tell me we may be friends again" with its suggestions of past betrayal and failure. The ambiguities intrigue the reader, and enrich the poem.¹⁰

¹⁰ Levi talks of Fenton in his poetry as having "an interest in riddles" (op. cit. p. 27).

The world of which the speaker, however ambiguous he may be, has knowledge in "I Saw a Child" shares certain features with that of "A German Requiem." It is a world of politics and recent history made material, a deeply hostile and dangerous world. "The fields are mined," the speaker declares. "The Blue Vein River" which we have to cross (one presumes) conjures up for the reader the conflicts of South-East Asia between the 1950s and the present. Sooner or later "the shooting" will start. The whole world that is evoked by the poem is one of danger and hostility – "the wind blows cold," the river is "broad and deep" (and therefore hard to cross), "branches creak," "shadows leap," "the moon is bright" (presumably not good if you wish to cross enemy territory by night), a child reaches "from the mud" and is "torn apart," the "night is long" (a night of waiting, a night spent crossing dangerous terrain?). And the danger and hostility are, one assumes, connected with the politics that surround the poem's world. Only for the refugee in flight in a place of war do all these elements become menacing. Is this world an apocalyptic one like that of "A German Requiem"? Perhaps in part it is. The child of the opening line has "silver hair," and we learn in stanza 2 that it "will never sleep." These features certainly make the child rather sinister and emblematic, a haunting spirit rather than a real child, although its sufferings are real enough. A strange Christ-child come to judge? Is the Blue Vein River a river of death? Certainly the landscape of the poem is a damned and unforgiving one. The "shooting" is inevitable.¹¹

3

"Cut-Throat Christ: or the New Ballad of the Dosi Pares" (like "I Saw a Child" from the *Out of Danger* collection) possesses many similar features to the two poems discussed above.¹² The subtitle aligns itself firmly with a traditional genre by declaring itself to be a "New Ballad," while the "Dosi Pares" of the remainder of the subtitle is the embodiment of a kind of specialised and exotic knowledge that the speaker of the poem possesses. In fact, this phrase, like several others, has to be explained in a note at the volume's end. (There we are told that the *dosi pares* are the Twelve Peers of Charlemagne, who form the subject of Tagalog ballads in the Philippines.)

The text of "Cut-Throat Christ" itself is at once very traditional and at the same time standing at an oblique angle to that tradition. It does not follow traditional English ballad form, either in rhyme scheme, rhythmic pattern or stanza form. And yet it echoes the ballad so clearly. (In fact, many ballads, both traditional and literary, deviate substantially from the paradigmatic tetrameter-trimeter-tetrameter-trimeter / abcb pattern.) "Cut-Throat

¹¹ Gioia remarks that the success of Fenton's *The Memory of War* collection has to do with his "combination of technical skill and political interests" (op. cit. p. 126). A poem like "I Saw a Child" indicates that these qualities continue in the *Out of Danger* volume.

¹² *Out of Danger*, p. 50–54.

Christ" is composed of four-line stanzas, rhyming aabb, with a refrain inserted intermittently. There are usually four main stresses in each line, and the lines are frequently anapaestic although there is a great deal of irregularity. For example, in line 7 the rhythm changes from anapaestic to iambic, and in line 8 it is rather unclear how one is meant to read the line, as one can make it have four, five or even six main stresses. There are numerous lines where the number of weak stresses attached to a strong stress make it difficult to talk about traditional accentual-syllabic categories of iambs and anapaests, and make one want rather to refer to the even more traditional accentual meters of Anglo-Saxon verse and folk- and nursery rhymes. Examples of such lines are: "And when I brought my beinte-nuebe for the boss to see" (stanza 7); "So I go barefoot down to Quiapo and the streets are packed" (stanza 23); and, "And General Ching, the EPD, the senatorial bets" (stanza 25). To maintain the four main stress pattern of the poem here, one must place the first main stress in the first example on "brought," in the second on "foot," and in the third on "Ching." This clearly involves having a large number of weak stresses preceding the main stress, in a way that barely fits in with normal scansion, but in a way that is quite acceptable in folk- or nursery rhyme. This kind of irregularity gives the poem an authentically rough feel, the sort of effect Coleridge aims at by using fourth line dimeters rather than trimeters at various points in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." This sense of genuine roughness (one associates folk-tradition products like ballads with an unpolished quality) is augmented by shifting word stress in order to rhyme fully. Thus, in stanza 3, "fraternity" must be pronounced with the stress on the final syllable, as opposed to the second syllable, in order to rhyme fully (and to avoid being an anisobaric rhyme). The same is true in stanza 12 with the rhymes "flee" and "military." Thus, although "Cut-Throat Christ" does not follow a classic ballad pattern in rhythm and rhyme, it clearly echoes traditional balladic forms, albeit in oblique ways. It is, after all, a "New Ballad" and one – at least professedly – from a non-English, and non-European cultural context.

The speaker of the ballad, his world and his language all allow one to identify "Cut-Throat Christ" further with a ballad tradition. Ballads often depict the violent deeds of outlaw figures, their depredations and betrayals. "Cut-Throat Christ" follows this model closely. The speaker and protagonist is a minor Manila gangster (a "punk"); the story material of the ballad involves his betrayal of his gang-leader and his own betrayal by the authorities. The action is clearly set in a world of crime and violent deeds. In addition, the narrative has some of the ellipses, the sudden jumps in action that are associated with traditional ballads. For example, the speaker's career as a gangster is almost entirely omitted, as is his agreement to betray his boss to the police. The language, too, is a highly informal one, as one might expect from a quasi-folk-product. Lexis such as "kids" (for children), "momma," "rich bitch," "there aint" [sic], "this guy says," "squeal" (for inform), "ran like fuck," and "Cos," and much more, is obviously very informal, indeed

colloquial with elements of criminal argot to boot. In addition, there are a few items of lexis which are clearly rooted in the world of Filipino crime, some of which are explained in notes – "beinte-nuebe" (a kind of knife), "plenty stainless" (gin), "long necks" (bottles of spirits), the "EPD" (not explained in notes, but presumably a department of the Manila police), and the "Black Nazarene" (a statue of Christ favoured by the Manila criminal fraternity). Once again, the effect aimed at is one of an authentic product of a demotic tradition, although one should note here also that the speaker is, like those in "A German Requiem" and "I Saw a Child," a knowledgeable figure, and behind him stands the figure of the text's implied author, who is able to explain what he will not. The knowledgeability of the poem's speaker is not just access to an arcane argot, but is also expressed in his generic statements about the world, as in the text's refrain.

There's a Christ for a whore and a Christ for a punk

A Christ for a pickpocket and a drunk

There's a Christ for every sinner but one thing there aint –

There aint no Christ for any cutprice saint.

Mutatis mutandis, a neo-classical poet could scarcely be more apodeictic, more sure of his knowledge of the world.

The world of which the gangster of "Cut-Throat Christ" has knowledge compares closely with those of "A German Requiem" and "I Saw a Child." Here, too, it is a world of politics, things, violence and danger – of knives, murder, rich ladies, bottles of gin, the Manila Superhighway, political candidates ("the senatorial bets"), Armalite rifles, and the EPD.¹³ The poem's speaker and protagonist has to negotiate a world as dangerous as the mined fields of "I Saw a Child" or the dreadful mid-century history of Germany in "A German Requiem."

Now Manila's not the place for a defenceless thing -

You either go with Jesus or with General Ching

And I'd been with both and after what I'd been

I knew my only hope was the Black Nazarene.

In this stanza, it is important to note that Jesus is not Christ, but a Manila gangster boss. However, in the last line of the stanza the speaker turns to the Black Nazarene, a statue of Christ which, according to Fenton's notes, is an object of a cult, particularly among criminals, in Manila. In the poem's last six stanzas, its protagonist seeks refuge in Quiapo, the statue's home. Here all the figures, and some more, of the poem are gathered together in a procession to honour the statue.

And there's the man who killed the Carmelites, the Tad-tad gang,

The man who sells the Armalites in Alabang

And General Ching, the EPD, the senatorial bets,

The twelve disciples and the drum majorettes. . . .

¹³ Perhaps this is part of what Schmidt means by "a failure of transcendence, even of hunger for transcendence" in contemporary poetry (op. cit. p. 29).

It is not a matter of over-interpretation to see an apocalyptic element here. All Manila seems to be on the street, all the speaker's world at least, walking in a procession to honour a dark god, who is able to "crush them to eternity" at any moment. It is at least a danse macabre, or even a parade of souls at the Last Judgement. The speaker's last words reinforce this. "Cut-Throat Christ," he calls, "don't turn your back on me."

4

The three poems discussed show considerable differences, but also substantial similarities. All take up exotic, non-British subjects – German history, the landscape of flight and war, Manila's underworld – and all have a knowledgeable guide to those worlds. Although the poems' speakers are not without ambiguous qualities (and in "Cut-Throat Christ" he is, of course, a murderer and traitor), they do possess a lot of recondite knowledge which they pass on to the poems' readers. They do so in a language which is relatively accessible, and when its informality shifts into argot, the implied author is ready with a glossary. Poetic forms are traditional – the requiem, the rhyming lyric, the ballad – as is what one might call the poems' rhetoric, patterns of parallelism and repetition which emphasise features of the texts' worlds and, indeed, the speakers' view of that world.¹⁴ These worlds are worlds of a particular and consistent configuration – of "things" in a broad sense (houses, streets, bombs, mines, rifles, knives, bottles of gin, the realia of life in Manila), of politics and history. And it is a deeply dangerous world; the fields are mined, the bombs fall, the gangsters and the EPD seek you out. Deeply specific worlds, they carry nevertheless a resonance beyond themselves. Forgetting a dark history might not only be a necessity and temptation for mid-twentieth-century Germans; refugees cross minefields not only in South-East Asia; gang bosses and the EPD make life miserable in places beyond Manila. These worlds, too, have apocalyptic notes to them – in the cataclysm of mid-century German history, in the "child with silver hair," and in a quasi-Last Judgement in a district of Manila. The poems offer little comfort in all this; one's guides are somewhat compromised themselves. "Stick with me and I'll take you there," one of them says. But would you trust him?¹⁵

¹⁴ Thom Gunn has noted that British poets seem much more attached to traditional technique than their US counterparts. See: Lee Bartlett: *Talking Poetry: Conversations in the Workshop with Contemporary Poets*. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press 1987, p. 91.

¹⁵ Corcoran's argument (see note 8 above) that Fenton's poetry is much more interested in the world than the self (op. cit. p. 294) can be seen to be only partly true. The poems reveal a great deal about their speakers in the political and social world of the poems.