In Conversation with Evangeline Paterson

by JOY ALEXANDER

Evangeline Paterson is a poet and a Christian. She was born in Limavady, grew up in Dublin—where she remembers writing poetry at the age of seven—and now lives in Leicester. Her collection, *Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa*, is currently in print, and her poems appear in *The Lion Book of Christian Verse, 100 Contemporary Christian Poets,* and several secular anthologies. She also edits the poetry magazine *Other Poetry.*

Evangeline has given a poetry reading at the library of the Irish Christian Study Centre, and the Literature Group which meets under the auspices of the Study Centre has a special interest in her poetry and provides prayer support as she practises her calling as a poet in a secular world.

Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa (Taxus, £3.75) can be purchased from the Irish Christian Study Centre Library.

Introducing the Poetry

At a time when so much poetry seems to be characterised by obscurity, it is refreshing to turn to the poems of Evangeline Paterson. Here we find approachable poems, readable poetry. It is rather like listening to a wise conversationalist, for these are poems that 'read well'. In the experience of reading them we recover that quality that was once held to be a hallmark of a good poem—delight. There is genuine pleasure and enjoyment to be had, yet this is not something facile, a mere momentary smile. We find ourselves beguiled into wisdom, glimpsing insights that linger and are reinforced as poems are re-read.

Many of her poems are narratives, recreating small incidents or recording mini-biographies. A number have the flavour of ballads, while many are rooted in, and hence have the authenticity of, Evangeline Paterson's own, daily, home-centred life. In particular, the focus is on people, almost invariably given names, pursuing their individual lives, all the more striking when compared with so much modern poetry which seems to have been penned in an ivory tower devoid of human company. Here we have one response to Pope's dictum: "The proper study of mankind is man". The different ways in which human lives are explored seem inexhaustible—people in their quirkiness, unconscious humour, and especially in those moments of crisis by which a life is defined. Evangeline Paterson has the gift of penetrating beneath the surface: in "Moriarty", Moriarty has a face "like a wooden Indian" and in "Ballad of Marjorie", Marjorie "held her face like stone", but the poet gives an understanding of the deeper sorrows that are belied by the facial expression. Just as in "Coming Alive" a child's coat seen in a museum collection brings to the imagination the real life of the child who once wore it, so other cultures and historical eras are not encountered in the abstract but in terms of an individual life on which they impinged. There are misfits here, such as a crazy girl and a tinker woman—an indication partly of Evangeline Paterson's sympathetic interest in all of humanity, even its fringes—perhaps especially the fringes because she can give a voice to those who are too often passed over and neglected; and an indication also of a value implicit in this poetry, that all that lives is of worth. Usually we are given a woman's perspective; frequently the tone is gentle and tender. "Old Woman in the City" brings before our attention such a bag-lady as we have all seen on a city street and passed by on the other side—

But I saw her once, in a phone booth,
furious, shouting into the dumb receiver:
'You got no respect for a person!
You got no respect!'—and stand
for a long time, listening,
under the notice saying 'Out of Order'.

More than the phone is out of order in such a world, yet, as the poem itself testifies, respect is precisely what Evangeline Paterson has.

These are meaningful poems, measuring up to T.S. Eliot's description of a poem as "perfection of form united with a significance of feeling". Generally the significance is present as under-statement, for there is no didacticism but instead a meaning to be discerned for those who have ears to hear. Metaphor presses in: both "Tribal Homeland" and "Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa", for example, in their own way contribute a great deal to the debate about the problems of the African continent. The poems move between the poles of dark and light, dream and reality, silence and song. There is an awareness of the modern predicament of *Angst* and anomie with their attendant terror—

and there was a whisper of crying
under the dumb sky, an echo of
steps going another way, a sound
of nobody coming

yet—wonderfully—the overall impression is always positive, affirmative and wholesome. Fools refuse to face reality or blinker themselves against it. Endurance is seen as a virtue, and there is tender understanding for those who cave in under the pressure of reality. Better to take on the burden of living even at the cost of becoming its victim, like Ha-no-mi in "The Betrayed Girl", than to find a cheap comfort in avoiding all the issues as

Putzi Hanfstaengel does, and Mrs Stephanopoulos in "Armaments Race" and the man in "Death on a Crossing". Death is frequently a part of the subject-matter; in the collection *Reprints* death is explicitly present in almost half of the poems. Thus words are not used to shield us from reality but to assist us to face up to it. In "Miss Emily in White" there is admiration for Emily Dickinson who confronts Death the enemy. Always there is an underlying note of moral responsibility. In the "Ballad of Marjorie" all those who knew her are ultimately implicated in her suicide. The tone is judicious rather than judgemental, but the clear implication is always that human beings are accountable. This quiet but steady outlook gives balance and integrity to the poetry as a whole. People matter and what they do matters—in this more than in anything else a Christian world-view is conveyed.

The range of styles and approaches in Evangeline Paterson's poetry is wide. Even a superficial reading gives an impression of endless variety. Poems which at first may seem to deal with remote subject-matter turn out to be grounded in the familiar, and for this reason are accessible and effective. Jehanne may belong to the medieval world, and the historical Madeleine of "Elegy for Madeleine" may have died in 1537, but their experience of love and loss becomes real and relevant to any reader. More often than not it is 'out-of-doors' poetry, with images characteristically drawn from nature. In particular the imagery is elemental, literally so, and usually air threatens while water welcomes. There is lyricism, but most striking is the economy of expression. In a few lines a poem is located in both time and space. The simplicity and clarity extends even to sparing use of punctuation. It takes a sure touch in a poet to hold to such a sharp, clear focus, and yet leave room for so much between the lines. Bare statement is carried to its ultimate in "Dispossessed", where the stark, factual sentences exemplify the totality of which Obed has been dispossessed. Such economy in language must necessarily be allied to precision in

vocabulary, to words which evoke more than they state. It is impossible to give examples because every poem has its pleasures in the deployment of words. Consider "Siesta" in which the maids are "laying the silver straight", the widow's moneyed daughter is "befurred in a taxi", and the widow herself goes "creaking and corseted down the wavering stair". In each case the detail contained in one phrase is sufficient to delineate an entire stratum of society with its attitudes, duties or privileges.

It is not surprising that a poet and a Christian would value the word, and Evangeline Paterson continually comes back to speech, to what people and things say, and in some of the best poems goes beyond that to give a voice to the dumb. The poem "Silence" is about how much silence actually says, and how much it needs an interpreter. Yet the poems not only avoid, but sometimes rebuke, romanticism. There is the realism of "Warning", and a refusal of sentimentality in the haunting award-winning poem "Visitation" or very differently in the witty "Dilemma":

> The water that I live in
> is full of piranha
> and it doesn't do
> to have a bleeding heart
> here.

These are only the first lines of the poem and are sufficiently diverting for the cleverness of the amazing punch-line at the end to come as even more of a shock. The danger of critical analysis is that it treats its subject with too heavy a hand and too much seriousness, which in the case of Evangeline Paterson would be to misrepresent her stance and tone and lightness of touch. She has a 'fey' imagination, healthy curiosity, amusement at human foibles, and a sense of humour which ranges

from the whimsical to the sardonic. Who could fail to warm to the cow which says to the ewe in "A Poem, with Respect"—

> Buck up, dear. Grit your teeth. Here comes Ted Hughes

or to jolly Flora Wickerley in "A Moral Tale":

> her eyes come-hithering and her feet aching

or to the nemesis wished upon Vittorio Emanuele in "Triangle, with Camel"?

No survey such as this can cover all the aspects of Evangeline Paterson's poetry with its potential enrichment for the reader. What is certain is that no-one who turns to her poems could come away disappointed. In "Country Churchyard" the poet stands in the churchyard, recreated in our minds by its "windy tower", "creaking of boughs", "constant cawing", "green moss", "cracked stone" and "leafdrift". Here is the grave of Matthew and Jenny Bludgen, "who were so blithe, so kindly", somewhat old-fashioned adjectives, recalling values far removed from those of the Bludgen grandsons who "riot at factory gates". The poet looks

> to the wood
> where their window shone, once,
> in a murky world.

The next line tells us that "it is dark now, and late". As then, so now. And as with the good couple whom the poem memorialises, Evangeline Paterson lets her light so shine.

Meeting the Poet

Evangeline, could you elaborate a bit on your Irish background? Do you feel that Ireland has contributed anything—positively or negatively—to your poetry?

I spent my earliest years wishing to be English. This was, I think, because of being a Protestant in Dublin—very much a shunned minority. I read Dickens from the age of seven, told my mother that I intended to marry an English soldier. (I did! In the first photos my husband ever gave me, before we were married, he wore an officer's uniform!). But now I find that I can't get away from my Irish roots. I feel that the rhythms in my poems, based on my own voice, sound awful when read by the English! I was very pleased to be included in the first ever anthology of Irish women poets.

How did your commitment to Christianity come about?

Despite an exceedingly rigorous Christian upbringing, I genuinely got saved when I was nineteen. When I was younger I had tried very hard to 'achieve' a conversion, and God paid not the slightest notice. By the time I was nineteen I had rather lost interest, and then it was God's idea, not mine. I am not at all naturally a religious person, and had seen so much I didn't like about Christianity, that I still think it's a miracle that I was ever hauled kicking and struggling into daylight.

I have a feeling that you might not like the term 'a Christian poet'. How do you in fact see the relationship between your Christian living and your poetry writing?

I don't like the term "Christian poet". One might as well say I am a Christian housewife. I am a Christian, so that everything I do is different. I feel no obligation to write "Christian" poems.

But I have a world view that includes God, an afterlife, a judgement, and a concept of moral responsibility, which makes me different from almost every other poet I know who is writing now.

Are there any particular influences on your poetry that you are aware of? What poets do you enjoy reading?

Influences—I constantly thank God for Shakespeare. I think there is nobody like him. After that, Eliot. I like Geoffrey Hill. I do not like the Romantic poets and I do not like confessional verse. I read new poetry most of the time, and when I go back it is to the Elizabethans and occasionally scraps from the Jacobean. Seamus Heaney's last book, *The Haw Lantern*, made me cry in a railway station buffet. But I seldom find current poetry so moving.

The subjects of many of your poems are women—Jehanne, Marjorie and Gunna, for example. And the fact that you are a housewife and a mother is also apparent in a number of poems. Do you yourself regard the fact that you are a woman poet as of any significance?

The fact that I am woman does make a superficial difference, but I think poetry should reach beyond sex, politics, class and all the other barriers, to the level where we are all human beings trying to live our lives the best way we can in this bewildering world. I don't want to be anything but a woman, and what I offer is a woman's eye view of the world, but I don't terribly want to make a big deal out of it.

In some of your poems—"Armaments Race", the African poems, and "History Teacher in the Warsaw Ghetto Rising", which I find especially and memorably moving - a moral standpoint is at least implied. Do you think you have any 'message' in your poetry?

I do think I have a noticeable moral standpoint in my poems, which is unconscious and which I can't help, and I think it counts heavily against me as far as acceptance and publishing goes. I have sometimes lost friends because of it—ie. my poem about Putzi Hanfstaengel, and "Female War Criminal", in the anthology of second World War poems, *Chaos of the Night*._ I was told about a poet who had heard some of my poems read, bought my book, and told the reader afterwards, "I didn't like it. It stung".

There's a fair bit of death in your poems. Ernest Hemingway said that "all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true storyteller who would keep that from you". Do you think you share this outlook?

Yes, I think death is a fact of life. Life wouldn't be complete without it. As Christians, particularly, I think it is something we have constantly in our minds—not in any morbid sense. I see death for me as a tremendously exciting passage into something unbelievably better than we have here. For people in general, I see death very often as a blessing, and acceptance of death—coming to terms with it—as a very character-forming thing.

Where do you get your ideas for poems? You seem to cover such an enormous range.

I wish I knew where the ideas for poems come from, because then I could go and get one when I wanted. I think the wide

range I cover is because of my very crowded and chaotic life. I have never had time to sit and brood. I have just won a writing bursary and have arranged three weeks (which is all I could manage at once) in a country cottage, and this is going to be a new experience. My writing had dried up considerably because of magazine-editing, and I want to see if enforced silence and solitude will help me to dig down and clear the spring.

Do poems come easily to you, as in the traditional, but no doubt wrong-headed, picture of the poet writing under the influence of a flow of inspiration? Or perhaps writing is for you more like practising a craft, something you have to labour over.

Nothing can be done without inspiration. But once the familiar 'ping' has sounded in the brain, when something, encountered quite casually maybe, suddenly lights up and becomes all-important, then the work comes into it. Sometimes, but seldom, a poem is written almost straight off. Much more often it takes considerable dogged hard work. The title poem of my book, for instance, "Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa", was worked over so hard that I thought the sweaty thumb-prints would be visible all over it, but people tell me they don't show. I think I would have abandoned it if I hadn't wanted the title so badly for the book, because I couldn't think of another one.

You obviously have a sense of hunour. "Armaments Race" is witty from the tone of the first stanza right up to the punch-line at the end. "Mrs Pintrap" is downright mischievous and "Herald of Spring" and "Programme Note" make me smile every time I read them. But I suspect being a poet nowadays is not all sweetness and light, smiles and good humour. Is it tough out there in the world of poetry?

It is certainly tough in the world of poetry. There are cliques—and I suspect the poetry world has always been like this—who

control the major outlets whose work I do not like and who would certainly not like mine. They not only cut down very much my chances of being published, but also my likelihood of being able to read people whose work I would find sympathetic. I have made my own airhole with my magazine, where I go for poems that actually relate to human people and show human feeling, both qualities being at a considerable discount nowadays.

To develop that last point, the unique flavour of your poetry for me is that so many poems are about people, treated as individuals, whose choices matter, and whom you clearly care about very much. This is what I find so deeply Christian in your poems. Would you like to comment on that?

For me people are terribly important. I think this is inseparable from my faith, and also the fact that choices are important.

And again, Christianity for you obviously extends to the whole of life and sanctifies even the most ordinary of moments—

> *"yet there is time for epiphanies between*
> *ironing the blue pyjamas and the green".*

I was brought up in a Christian environment where, because God had to be given pre-eminence, nothing else was allowed to be important. I have broken through to the position that because God exists, everything has significance. This makes life very exciting. And for a Christian the most exciting things can happen in all kinds of little chinks of time and experience, like ironing the pyjamas. We have this absorbing inner life that goes on all the time and illuminates and gives importance to the outer life.

Do you think being a Christian has heightened your perceptions or is it that, as a poet, you have a gift for imaginative awareness?

I don't know that poets are more aware than most people, except in spots. I don't imagine I'm more perceptive than any other woman who has lived a long time and read a lot and watched people a lot, except when the poetic function takes over. It's like the shutter of a camera opening, and letting in one flash of really penetrating insight, which is then taken in and worked over by the inner chemistry until a poem comes out. In between these moments of vision, I think we're just as stupid as the rest of humanity.

You would expect the general Christian public to appreciate poetry—the Bible, after all, contains some magnificent poetic passages, and we are used to honouring the Word. Do Christians in general respect and encourage you in your calling?

Christians as a rule do not see the need for poetry, except, of course, in the Psalms, where they feel safe. I do not feel that other Christians, except a very few, have any particular sympathy or interest in what I do. Strangely, the one thing that has made an impact is the fact that I was recently awarded a thousand pounds. People who can't see for themselves the value of poetry have at least had to admit that what I do is valuable to somebody! I hope this doesn't sound bitter. I'm not particularly bitter about it, it's a fact of life I accept, and I'm thrilled when I find someone who shared my interest and preoccupation with poetry. Otherwise, life can be rather solitary.

Thank you very much, Evangeline, for all you have shared in this conversation. By way of conclusion, could you select one or two of your poems and perhaps introduce them for us? The poetry, of course, stands on its own; it would be a fitting way to finish, and hopefully will help to broaden your readership.

Visitation

'Have you heard of angels?' said the visiting lady
to the little poor child. 'They have you in their keeping.
They hover around you when your prayers are said.
They whisper dreams in your ear when you are sleeping'.

Said the little poor child, 'I have seem them, tall as gantries
and thick as rain in the air above the town.
They all leaned one way like a field of wheat.
Their faces were white as paper. Their tears fell down.'

This image of a skyful of angels, all leaning at a slant and weeping, came to me with great force and persistence, and I couldn't imagine what to do with it. It finally resolved itself in my subconscious, and emerged one Sunday morning, as I woke up, in this form. Much later I realised where the image had apparently first been suggested to me—when I saw the west window of Coventry Cathedral, etched with saints and angels.

This is a second poem triggered off by the same image, much more conscious and close to the surface.

Angels at Coventry

Pacing the length of the aisle with Auntie Grace,
who walks with a cane, and leans on my arm,
passing the carved canopy of the choir
like flocks of birds that rise on a single note,
pausing under the weight of the Christ in Glory,
we turn, slow and careful, towards the west

and are staggered by flights of angels, etched in glass,
like flickers of frozen fire. Jagged as lightning
they stand, taller than pillars, or lean oblique,
launched at the sky like Concorde. 'Auntie, look!
Angels!' I cry, forgetting the step
we are shuffling on to. Auntie, unsure on her feet
but head screwed on, grips me, or I would have fallen
flat on my face in the aisle, astonished by angels.