

PNR 118...

ELAINE FEINSTEIN IN CONVERSATION

with Michael Schmidt

During a visit to Manchester in June 1997, the poet, novelist, translator and biographer Elaine Feinstein was interviewed at the University by Michael Schmidt about her new collection *Daylight*.

MICHAEL SCHMIDT I want to talk to you first about origins. There is a strong Russian element obviously in your poetry, but there's also Russian blood in your veins, isn't there?

ELAINE FEINSTEIN Russian Jewish blood, I have to say. All four grandparents were Russian Jews, who came from Odessa. I know a bit about the grandfathers, and about one of the grandmothers. The grandfather on my father's side was well-read in Rabbinic literature, and had been trained at a Yeshiva in Odessa. He could also speak five languages, and write in most of them. But over here he worked in the wood trade. So did all his children, including one of my aunts. This was fortunate for my grandfather ; he was able to go off and study, while the rest of the family got on with the hard business of earning a living. As a result, my own father left school at twelve. My other grandfather was much sharper. He wasn't an intellectual, he was a glass merchant, but he made a great deal of money, so his sons went to university, two of them indeed to Cambridge.

Did his family remain Orthodox Jews?

Not in the least. My mother's brothers were socialists, and militantly atheist. On my father's side of the family, however, they did by and large. My father was Orthodox. Perhaps not by contemporary standards, but he was a believer. No one would regard him as Orthodox today.

Did your father know Russian?

No. My grandfather of course had books in Russian but his preferred language was Yiddish and anyway he could speak English. My father spoke Yiddish which he enjoyed.

And do you speak Yiddish as well? Or is it a fading element?

Key phrases remain. Shrugs. Insults. Jokes. I'm not a good linguist. I'm not a Russianist, for instance. I'm a very nervous Russian speaker.

You were born in Bootle, and brought up in Leicester. What were they doing in Bootle?

My mother would probably never have married my father if it hadn't been for the First World War which eliminated a whole generation of possible husbands for her. He was handsome

ebullient, good-natured and in one of his prosperous periods, but my grandfather disapproved of him intensely. She was allowed to marry him, I suspect, only because she was already twenty nine. I was born in Arundel Avenue, which is a fairly pleasant street in Bootle, after they were married. We moved to Leicester in my first year. That was a bad time for the North, particularly for Liverpool - a lot of unemployment and not much trade - and Leicester had very diverse industry. My father was always enterprising. He wasn't a great businessman, though. He was too uncalculating. Not to say extravagant.

And your mother?

She was a pretty woman. But rather a timid one. She was crushed, I think, because her rhesus negative blood killed all the children she conceived after me. I remember her being taken off in an ambulance. Or having to rest in the afternoons. But it was she who taught me to read, and she loved books.

Did she feel later on, like Mrs Hardy, that it was a misalliance? That she had married beneath her somewhat?

No, she adored my father. She sometimes tried to make him more polite, less inhibited.

Was it the Jewish community you moved into in Leicester or a general community?

We were very much part of the Jewish community. In fact my father was President of the Synagogue. Largely through my mother, who did all the background administrative work, while he sat in his seat with his top hat and enjoyed being President. They attended the Synagogue on all the Festivals. While I was living in Leicester I used to accompany them. It was fun. I had a lot of cousins living in the same town and they all went as well. Children didn't have to pray. We used to go outside and chatter.

You went to grammar school in Leicester?

The Wyggeston grammar school.

And then you got a scholarship to Cambridge?

An Exhibition.

A poor man's scholarship. You went to - ?

To Newnham, to read English.

When did you start getting interested in English? Were you writing poems?

I started writing poems, like most poets, very young. When I was nine or ten I had a selection of poems put in for the Sir Jonathan North Medal. Which I didn't win, I have to say.

And the early poems, I assume, rhymed and scanned.

Oh yes. When I was recently going through boxes of my old manuscripts, I came across a long poem called 'Leda' which is a pastiche of Keats...

Keats, not Yeats. When did you go up to Cambridge?

'49 to '52. I knew and admired people like Peter and Tony Shaffer who were at Trinity, and several Fulbrights who were older and much more sophisticated than anyone else I'd ever met : Norman Podhoretz, for instance.

Were you under the thumb of Leavis? He seems to have had quite a big thumb.

Newnham undergraduates were not encouraged to attend Leavis' lectures, but of course we did. I guess we were, all, under his influence. We read his books. And in my third year I went along to his seminars for practical criticism.

What was the parallel culture to Leavis? Because we get this impression of a sort of hegemony of Leavisites at the time -

No, no, no. Not at that time. At Newnham we were taught to value scholarship and we admired C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*. And we went to Rossiter and heard all about early pre-Elizabethan drama. I didn't specialise. I was very interested in things that didn't come into the syllabus.

American poetry?

American poetry and also novels. Faulkner, for instance.

At what point did you meet Donald Davie?

I went to London after I got my degree. Got married and came back. And after my return, I became very active in the undergraduate world. I supervised for several Colleges, and I edited an issue of the undergraduate magazine *Cambridge Opinion*; an issue called 'Writer out of Society', based on my enthusiasm for Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett and Allen Ginsberg. Not fashionable preoccupations at the time. We were living in a great commune of undergraduates and their friends; two of them were taught by Donald Davie. I remember being very impatient with the Movement poets they were trying to interest me in and

showing them some Wallace Stevens in return. This they reported back. Donald said - 'Actually Wallace Stevens is a great poet, she's right about that.' They were absurdly impressed. So we had him round to dinner and got on very well.

During your time at Cambridge you were associated with what is now thought of as The Cambridge School - J.H. Prynne, I understand, used to sit on your floor.

Prynne paced around. But yes, the *English Intelligencer* poets sat on my floor. That was a little later, when I was living in Trumpington. I was teaching at Essex by then and had a book of poems out. But when I began to write I was very well aware I didn't have the right voice for current English poetry. It was partly because I was so influenced by Americans, partly, as I wrote in the introduction to that recent Liverpool Anthology, because I didn't have the right intonation and rhythms. I started my own magazine, *Prospect*, not to publish my own poems, but to introduce Olson, Paul Blackburn and others who weren't yet known in this country. That's how I came to meet Prynne. In fact, I sold *Prospect* to Prynne. He was young then and had not yet become the Guru of Caius. When I say I sold *Prospect* to him, I gave him my overdraft and the title, and on that he built a network of American connections. He made something much more out of them than anything I had.

When I look back at poems in In a Green Eye and look at Prynne's early work, there isn't that much common ground between you. What is the difference?

He was more interested in the glitter of the language and more intellectual than emotional. He looks at the world in conceptual terms. But I admired the surface of his poems.

Do you still read his work?

I don't, no. You have to be in conversational or at least in postal touch with Prynne to understand the obsessions that feed his language.

What's striking about your first book is that the poems use the short line, and they use really quite a short syntactical measure all the way through. It's as if you could reorganise them if you wanted to - though I hope you won't - into longer lines with gaps. There is a phrased quality there but what is missing, it seems to me, is a sense of continuous syntax, which you get in the later work much more. Did Articulate Energy have an impact on you, do you think? I think it did with Tomlinson. I think he found a way out of the aridities of The Necklace in part through reading it.

I was very much affected by listening to Donald's lectures. Before them, I'd thought more about rhythm and vocabulary than syntax; I preferred simple propositions to any other structure.

In a way you've come back to a simpler sentence, but it is not the simple sentence you had then, which was very rudimentary.

I wanted that rudimentary quality, I think.

To some extent I can see Donald's impact, but it may have been a natural development in you anyway. But Tsvetayeva comes up quite early. How young were you when you first encountered her, and how did you encounter it?

I encountered her in a library, while researching a series of lectures I was giving on rhythm. I was reading Pasternak, and he talked about a woman whose 'rhythms soared above' all of his contemporaries. So I looked her out, and found she only existed in Russian. I translated her at first for myself, with the help of Angela Livingstone of course who was teaching in the Russian Department. It was a transforming experience. She released me from the constraints that were stopping me becoming a poet at that time, all of them part of the English tradition. A dislike of personal exposure, a kind of defensive caution.

Irony?

Nothing more protective than irony...

In a Green Eye is a totally unironic collection, which is why it stands out so much in 1966.

The thing irony defends you from is embarrassment. The English Movement poets were often embarrassed at the idea of expressing emotion or opinion without a cautious 'perhaps'.

But you were embarrassing. I remember the first time I heard you read 'Mother Love', the poem which mentions a child's faeces. One of the most beautiful poems you've written. I can't imagine many English poets being able to bring themselves to write that.

Certainly not then. It used to embarrass audiences. At first I minded the discomfort because the poem wasn't written to shock. It was an important poem for me, a way of yoking two very disparate parts of myself together. Donald was quite right to point out in *Under Briggflatts* that what drew me to Tsvetayeva was seeing in her the tension between poet as wife and mother and poet as an independent being. That still goes to the heart of my own life, even if the feminist battle sometimes looks as though it's been won.

Essex must have had an impact. How did you get there?

That was Donald's gift. I was teaching at a teacher's training college in Bishop's Stortford, wondering whether perhaps I'd do a part-time PhD. Donald very kindly arranged a research grant for me.

A fairy godfather.

Yes. He translated me from a rather hardworking but fairly bored teacher into a PhD student. At about the same salary. I lived in Cambridge and commuted. I didn't really become part of the Essex community. Not quite as I would have done if I'd lived there, but I took a bit of Essex away with me several evenings a week in the shape of Andrew Crozier, who often came back to Cambridge in my car. His poems were very lyrical. He never said very much in seminars, but when he did speak, one sentence would put the cat among the pigeons. I liked him very much.

What year did you go to Essex?

I think it was '68, or '67. I was certainly there in '68.

You were there for the ructions?

I was there for the ructions, yes. I never did complete the PhD but I did get a lectureship.

And Donald left in '69. So you were there for a year after that. How was life after that?

It wasn't so good for me. For two reasons. Firstly we went to Brighton, as a family. My husband Arnold went as a Reader to Sussex University. So to reach Essex I had to drive halfway across England. I got a small flat in Essex, on the quay in a little village nearby. Then Philip Edwards, in many ways a very decent man, wasn't as prepared as Donald had been to allow for my family responsibilities. Donald arranged it so that all my lectures bunched up on two days, and I could cope with that, but when I had to be there five days a week it was difficult for me.

You had read for the Bar in London. What happened? Did you get called, as it were?

I took the exams, but I never went into Chambers. Very sensibly actually. The whole plan was lunatic. Whereas I was perfectly capable of understanding the Law, and could have had a trade, if I'd been a solicitor, there was no way I could fight my way into Chambers and make a living at the Bar.

After Essex, to return to the main narrative, did you move back to Cambridge or to Brighton?

It wasn't quite so straightforward. We moved to Brighton while I was at Essex. Then Arnold resigned after a term. We moved back to Cambridge, to his old job, and we had two houses for a time with some complex financial difficulties. I went on going to Essex, but there was so much pressure...I crashed my car. It couldn't go on really. It was impossible. I started writing fiction - the first three or four chapters of *The Circle* were written for a small magazine edited by Tim Lonoville. They were like prose poems. I thought. And then Michael

Dempsey who was running New Authors at Hutchinson read them and made me an offer for the novel on the strength of them.

It was published in 1970. Fiction took the front seat for a bit?

The Circle was quite successful and *The Amberstone Exit* rather more so. And they both went into Penguin. Hutchinson offered to put me on a retainer for three years... one of those things that look like good news when you first hear about it but turn out to be really bad news. I had to produce a novel a year and they gave me the equivalent of my lecturer's salary for that. Which seemed wonderful. Only the trouble was I was always behind. I never took up teaching again. I supervised Cambridge undergraduates, for most of the colleges from time to time.

Going back to poetry - after Essex comes The Magic Apple Tree. Did you expect the poems to take off? Because they didn't at the time.

No, they didn't.

What's the common ground between the novels and the poems? The Circle starts with poetry, doesn't it.

The rhythms are very close to those of the poems, but the inner world of the characters flows more freely. Tsvetayeva enabled me to write openly. Because she doesn't feel embarrassed about sounding undignified. *The Circle* was a very undignified and self-exposing book.

The fiction itself - if you read it in a certain frame of mind - is curiously more self-exposing than the poetry. Your generation does have this difficulty with, and compulsion to, candour. Like Donald does in 'In the Stopping Train'. Do you find the fiction in the end is more exploratory of your own experiences?

In fiction people usually deny that's what they're doing. You can cover it up rather easily.

The best of both worlds. Which of your novels do you regard as closest to your own heart?

I still like *Children of the Rose* I think that stands out. But there are fourteen of them now, you know. *The Border* is an important book for me. And *Loving Brecht*.

Looking at the poems, there are the American elements that have gone into them as well as the Eastern European ones. Can you tell me about the American ones? You mentioned Stevens but you haven't mentioned the people I'd expect you to mention.

Stevens didn't influence me at all. I just loved him. William Carlos Williams - I didn't like him

as much as Stevens but I suppose he offered me tools, which Stevens didn't. He showed me how poetry could manage without using metaphor, how the literal description would work, so that was useful. The techniques of 'Black Mountain' also influenced me, though I'm not sure it was always for the best. They did help me to get the phrasing of my own voice into the line, which is what they mean by the Breath. Their use of pauses gave a spoken quality which I found useful. Ed Dorn didn't influence me at all. But Olson influenced me. I never met him.

But you had a famous correspondence with him.

That was in the middle 1950s, when I was starting *Prospect*. I wrote to Allen Ginsberg - because I liked his poetry, which most people thought was hilarious at the time. The early stuff is marvellous. I still enjoy what I once liked of his, but I dislike some of what he went on to write, particularly the plutonium poems. Anyway, I wrote to Ginsberg and he sent me a whole list of people I could write to, so I did. I was sitting in the house with two children, not doing anything else. I wrote to them all and got back screeds from Corso, Ferlinghetti, everyone. And I published what I liked of Olson, I liked it very much, but he puzzled me, so I wrote back to him and that started a correspondence.

And the others - Reznikov and Zukofsky - had perhaps less impact?

Reznikov was important, he gave me a way of looking at people. His poems sometimes centre just on the presence of a single person, and I learnt that if you could evoke the details of that presence, they gave an immediate validity to a poem.

Are there specific poems of yours that you think owe a particular debt to him?

An early poem about my father, one about my grandfather. In both I am not doing anything very different from what Reznikov was doing.

Though the language of course was very different. So, you had the Americans and getting to know Ted Hughes... Did you ever meet Sylvia Plath?

I only met Ted when Sylvia was already dead. He was the one at Faber, I am told, who thought I should be in *Faber Introduction 1*. His sister Olwyn got in touch with me when I was in Brighton, and she asked me would I like an agent? And I, in my arrogance, said I didn't need an agent, because I'd sold my novel, and my Tsvetayeva translations and the poems and I didn't have anything else to sell. So she came down to see me. I really liked her and not only was she my agent for the next ten years, she became a close friend. As a result I saw quite a bit of Ted during that time.

He's always been an advocate of your poems. It's one of the ironies of your work that you had an advocate in Donald Davie and an advocate in Ted Hughes.

Odd, isn't it? Very different people.

People in many ways who were at loggerheads and in curious ways you seemed to appeal to both elements.

That would suggest I occupied some usefully central position, but I never have. I've always been at the outside.

I wonder if they liked the same poems?

I don't know. I remember I was going to open my first *Selected Poems* with 'At Seven a Son' because that always went down well at readings, but Ted suggested I open the book with 'Father' because it was 'a much more solid poem'.

You mention readings. I first encountered your poetry at a reading, and yet, unlike a lot of poetry that goes down well, it is textually and semantically very rich. You don't write to perform, do you? You hear it as you write?

I listen to it as I write. And I know a poem is finished when it sounds right in my head. But I never can tell which poems are the ones that are going to read well out loud. So when I start reading from a new book like *Daylight* I have to guess which poems are going to work with audiences.

You have a distinctive reading style. You don't set the poems up. Every time I've heard you read it's been a different reading, a different patter between poems, as though you're thinking between them. You're not a performer -

I like readings - so to that extent I'm a performer. And I like audiences. But I like to read to a particular audience and respond to what seems to be happening.

We talked about Americans, but during the 1960s and 1970s you had a lot of contact with poets from the rest of Europe, particularly Eastern Europe?

With Russians, Hungarians, Poles and Czechs. Yes. Partly because of the Tsvetayeva translations and partly because of the Cambridge Poetry Festival. I met Yevtushenko through George Steiner. He had been having dinner at Churchill with George, and told him he was using my translation of 'An Attempt at Jealousy' in readings around America. And George asked if he knew I was living in Cambridge. So that very evening he telephoned, came round and we had one of those typical all night sessions where he talked all the time, and the rest of us listened. I remember one of my sons defrosted and cooked a steak for him at about midnight. He invited me to Moscow, and when I went there in pursuit of Tsvetayeva material for the biography, he was very helpful. Introduced me to several remarkable women poets whom I then interviewed for the BBC. Put a car at my disposal. Another good friend in Moscow was Margerita Aliger, the mother of Masha Enzensberger. She introduced me to Vika Schweitzer.

Have these poets from Eastern Europe had an impact on your writing as such or just on the landscapes, as it were, of some of your poems?

No influence from Yevtushenko, we had such totally different personalities, I loved some of the Polish poets - Szymborska, whom I never met but whose poetry I knew a long time before she had her Nobel prize. Hungarian poets influenced me more. I spent some time in Budapest and got to know some really quite remarkably good poets - particularly Janços Pilinsky, and Sandor Weores who translated some of my poems into Hungarian. Agnes Nagy was more personally influential - I can't really tell how any of that has gone into my poetry.

We've been talking for a spell and not very many women writers have come up.

Well, I mentioned Agnes Nagy and Tsvetayeva.

Has the experience of feminism and the repositioning of woman through feminism had an impact on you?

Yes, it has. It's relaxed me, really. Women poets used to be thought of as odd and spinsterly in the generation before mine. Now there are a lot of people who write poetry who are also women. On the centenary evening in the Purcell dedicated to Tsvetayeva, where I gave the introductory talk, there were about ten women poets who had all translated poems of Tsvetayeva and the audience was absolutely packed. And I thought that was just marvellous, that there were all these women, who apparently loved her - I thought I was alone, but not a bit of it. There were all these people responding in a very similar way to her.

Were they all following your style of translation?

Well, I suppose they were also working from literal versions.

For you the technical solutions were a series of important decisions in relation to a primary text, but they see it as something easy to do - that you spring the text and then re-connect the bits that fall off - for poetry as well as translation. When you were doing piggy-back translations it was not a common thing to do.

I was part of the influence. I wasn't the only one. There was a wonderful series of poets in translation in Penguin. We opened doored but we all made for a rather dangerous translatores, which wasn't altogether a good effect.

That was something Donald railed against. Not against your Tsvetayeva, which had a different depth. Given that Tsvetayeva is much more of a formalist than your translations would suggest, you see this and you bring this not into the form you choose but into the diction and into the semantic

nuances between the words, whereas other translators haven't perhaps achieved that formal transposition.

I do try to honour the shape through the physical shape on the page. I couldn't do her rhyme, but I did try to keep her rhythm. I did keep the stanzaic structure - in fact I don't think I ever wrote again without having a stanzaic structure to try to control my own poems too.

It's curious, having broken in a way with tradition, that you've come back to it. There is a wonderful passage in Eavan Boland's essays where she writes about wanting to write a poem appropriate to grow old in, and in your newest book there are poems which come to terms with things that are hard, in relationship and in time. Are you aware of actually trying to accommodate these experience?

Yes. I use poetry to crystallise whatever is preoccupying me at any given moment. To crystallise may not quite describe the process - crystals form round a string in a jam jar, or wherever you put the chemicals. It's a bit more involuntary than what I try to do when I craft a poem.

The poems do for the most part come to a point of stability, rather than remain in process, whereas the novels are more process-driven. Your structural modernism is more perhaps in fiction than in the poems; the novels are - and I don't mean this as a criticism - more conventional.

They have become much more so. There is a deliberate movement towards a more traditional form. At least that's the kindest way of putting it. The other way of putting it is to say that I aspired to a larger audience and made the novels much more accessible as a choice. Actually my next novel will be returning to something much more experimental.

Coming back to the poems, in the light of this, have they too been developing in a certain way. If I were to be given a 'typical' poem from In a Green Eye and one from Daylight I don't think I'd immediately say they were by the same author.

I am troubled by that. It's a development, which seems to have been entirely organic, in the sense that I seem to have reached this point of the trajectory quite naturally, without a series of decisions, but I would like to feel that it's the same sensibility running throughout.

It probably is, but I was thinking in formal terms and in terms of diction. The diction is much denser and deeper, more comprehended in the later than in the early poems - where the words are perfectly functional but they're transparent; you see through them to the objects named - while in the later poems you're excited by the way the language is meshing. You look at the language as well as through the language.

I'm not sure that I was so conscious of the opacity. I'm pleased about the density which I hope arises from compression.

Another thing in Daylight is more complex narratives than in the early poems. The early poems are 'incidents', aren't they? Not anecdotes but incidents. The later poems have much more extended narratives implicit in them.

Which ones do you think?

A lot of relationship poems.

Yes. Perhaps that isn't so surprising - when you're quite young things look simpler. Well, they did to me anyway. As I've got older, poems have had to bear a deepening knowledge of what relationships come to mean for me.

What is your poetic project at the moment?

I continue writing lyrics. Having said that, I do have a project for a long poem based on the idea of jeopardy or risk, which I haven't got quite clear in my mind, and which is not yet written. But I do have a number of lyrics, certainly. They seem to engender themselves. I suspect the project will be a sequence, based on the idea of risk taking, in one form or another. It will look at a lot of different lives of people who've taken risks.

Risk has always been a theme with you. In 1972 you published At the Edge. Had I picked it up at the time I'd have thought it somehow related to Alvarez, to the edges that Alvarez talks about, but at no stage have you risked the kind of factitious edges and boundaries that he advocates in the introduction to New Poetry.

I remember his introduction well. Not for me. If you've escaped the Holocaust entirely by the serendipitous chance of your family deciding not to settle in Germany, and you're conscious of that - as I was from about age nine onwards - you don't look for suicidal risks much. That's not exciting. Death is not exciting.

So the edge you're talking about is formal risk?

The risk I'm thinking about is the sort of risk you take in living, not playing safe.

Like in that early poem 'Mother Love'? It was a risk that paid off because it made it possible for the language of your experience to move further forward.

That's right. At least I hadn't got the brakes on.