

An Interview with Fay Zwicky

*Hena Maes Jelinek interviewed Fay Zwicky at the University of Liège on 5 May 1990.
Transcribed and edited by Marc Delrez*

Fay, the last time you were in Liège, it was to attend an international conference organized jointly by the Universities of Aachen and Liège, and you then gave a paper entitled: "The Deracinated Writer: Another Australia". You dealt mainly with recent immigrant writers, and you said that they offered another picture of Australia than the traditional one we get through the literature up to (say) the sixties, which gives mainly a picture of an Anglo-Celtic population. You also suggested that these people had perhaps a deeper insight, a more complex understanding, of the issue of antipodean identity.

Could you say what you feel about this issue now: do you think that the identity question is still an important one, specific to Australia? Or would you say that it has now begun to merge with similar preoccupations all over the world, since the world has now in a sense become a kind of global village, in which a lot of people are displaced?

Well I think the year that I said those things was in fact our bicentennial year. And because of this I felt perhaps more pressured to assert a difference rather than a likeness, partly as a reaction against the excessive upsurge of a regressive nationalism which I had hoped had been mitigated by historical circumstances, but which in fact appeared to be no less simplistic, a rather one-eyed and somewhat nostalgic longing for an Australia which was no longer existent. It seemed to me a kind of digging up of an Australia that my father would have recognized very well, but it seemed to me to be ignoring or bypassing many newer additions or currents. That is why I may have sounded a little bit more urgent about the insight that the newer writers were offering us, simply because I felt they were being marginalized, or less listened to, than they ought to have been - because their presence certainly has been felt since the war, although you wouldn't know it from what has been called *mainstream* Australian writing. So I suppose I was trying to adjust the balance a little bit, maybe making an excessive case but this, I think, was partly in reaction to the bicentennial fervour, which I found faintly irritating, and I don't think I was alone in that.

Now whether in fact this identity question joins us with the rest of the world, I'm pretty sure that's true because when I come to Europe (and I have been coming now three years running) my impression is of a nomadic world - chains of people uprooted, migrating, displaced, trying to settle (often in impossible

circumstances). In Australia, our immigrant population, though not ideally situated, is better off in many ways than immigrants coming to Europe who have less space and whose problems seem to be urban ones. Our way of dealing with the situation in Australia is potentially more optimistic, simply because our conditions are more favourable - or they have been. Economically now it is not strictly as good as it used to be, but certainly the migrants might be better off in Australia, although spiritually and emotionally all migrants (no matter where they go or come from) are bound to endure difficulties. And those difficulties either give them clearer perspectives on the new class they've come to settle to, or else destroy them. You could say that it is a unique opportunity for insight to be transplanted; but you could also say, depending on the age of the migrants (their toughness and capacity to survive), that they may or may not be advantaged by that passage of migration.

But I do think it is a world-wide condition. It strikes me how the whole world is like that, a shifting sandbank. There is no place where I feel: This is the Italy I thought I knew, or this is the England I thought I knew... Nothing is as I thought I knew it any more.

To come back to migrant writing in Australia: do you think that they are now better and more widely recognized, and that they fit in better into what is now called multicultural Australia?

Well, this question of recognition is always a tricky one with writing, because there is a market-place obviously, and publishers keep promoting those writers who in fact sit comfortably in this mould of post-modernism which many migrant writers don't, of course, for they are investigating *personal* issues, such as their own problematic development. This is why I am interested in them, because of the personal note, the human voice which is in there. It is no mere entertainment: it is an investigation, a quest. I suppose it is not fashionable, in the literary market-place, to indulge in this, unless you fit into some kind of ideological base: either you are a woman or you are an Aboriginal or you are somebody who has got an ideological extra ground. Now the migrant has an ideological extra ground sometimes, but because of differences in the migrant groups they don't have the same kind of ideological solidarity.

Again, then, the word "acceptance" is an awkward one. The more opportunity writers will have to publish, and the better known they will become to the reading public - but the reading public is a very odd animal. In Australia, the reading public will be buying the most fashionable novel (promoted very heavily, I won't say who by): obviously there are certain writers that one "must" read. Now the migrant writer, or the more recent writer writing in English, will have a limited audience because his or her own countrymen are not necessarily buying these books. It's the same with their SBS-Television, the multicultural television station: it is watched by middle-class Anglo-Celtic people, not by those Greeks and Italians for whom it was originally designed - they are watching *Neighbours* or *The Country Practice* or *Dynasty* or whatever. It is interesting, when you talk to young first-generation migrants from Greece, Italy or elsewhere, to find that their main wish is to be Australian; they do *not* wish to remain culturally separate from what they see as mainstream Australian culture. So, ironically, it is people

like myself, outsiders who have had a chance to be in the mainstream, but who are not strictly of it, who want to encourage their interest in their difference. As to the writers themselves, who are actually numerically few, their experience becomes available once Australians come to read their work. But for the reasons I mentioned there will always be a time warp, as it were; what they have to offer us will be taken up, but a little bit too late. We are out of gear with our migrant population, in a sense.

Do you think, then, considering not just literature but all aspects of Australian culture, that it is becoming multicultural, or has a chance of becoming so, or will migrants of various nationalities and backgrounds simply merge into the mainstream, which has always been Anglo-Celtic?

That's a very interesting question, causing a lot of upheaval at home. Because it's not like America, where a calculated effort is made to indoctrinate incoming migrants into the native culture. Australia has not bothered so far to put too much pressure, simply because its own identity confusion has rendered this almost impossible. If we had a constitution with the noble words of Lincoln and Jefferson ringing, then there would be something more like a blueprint, if you like, for democracy. Instead, our curious mixed beginnings have made it very difficult for the migrants to know what exactly they are trying to get integrated into. Some migrants will say in their literature that there is a mainstream from which they feel excluded; some migrants will not even bother with it. This is a regional thing too. Australia is very regional, although this is not often acknowledged. But a Greek or Italian migrant who goes to Melbourne, where they have very large communities, won't feel as lost as if pitched out in some small country town, or sent off to grow tomatoes in Carnarvon, up in North West Australia. It depends very much on the feeling of solidarity that they have with the group they come to. If you are a Turk who comes to Australia, you are not going to find too many Turkish migrants... And the women especially will be outside, because very often they are not in the workforce, but are stuck at home, cut off by language; so they are the ones who tend to be mentally depressed, and who must face the problem of trying to maintain a family decorum, which used to be proper in their own country but which is absolutely shot to pieces by our casual anarchic customs.

These things must play a part in the literature, and they do. You'll find for instance many Australian Greek writers writing about this, a number of them... There is also a very good writer of Polish origin, named Maria Lewitt, who has written very well about her youth and the upheaval of her displacement during the war. There is also a very good Turkish poet, Gün Gencer. And plenty of others too but I haven't kept up with them all - in fact I'm not really an authority on what's happening in multicultural Australia, because I have lived out of it for so long. But I do find it interesting that they are filling out a range of experience which the Anglo-Celtic writer has been protected from, simply by his or her relatively peaceful environment, and very little cultural displacement (unless freely chosen). You see, Australians have been free to displace themselves, as opposed to those people who were displaced by something else. But the kind of displacement that is forced on you by political circumstances, or oppression

from somewhere else, changes your whole *raison d'être*.

Let us talk now of your own place in Australian literature: the settling of your family goes back to several generations, and you know exactly the genealogy of your family, on both sides, at least up to a few generations. Do you feel, then, that you have anything in common with these more recent migrants, or not?

Well, although you would think that after so many generations of settlement I should not have that, strangely enough I do. But then I think anyone who feels by virtue of one's difference will always feel an outsider. The outsider is more or less always the one who doesn't feel that he or she belongs. And I don't know why that should be so, but I have a fair idea that has got something to do with being born Jewish. Even though I was not brought up in a particularly religious home, with any particular links with traditional Judaism, there was some urgency (I mean historical urgency) that in some way bound me psychically to a history which also extended beyond Australia. To that extent, though it could not be practically demonstrated that I have had a particularly Jewish upbringing, the awareness of difference was already implanted, even if it was only unspoken. You just knew.

Of course the reason why I am asking this, is that some critics have occasionally linked you with that group, using an expression I do not like: "ethnic writing".

It is rather comic, actually, because I remember giving a talk somewhere in Australia, and a woman came up to me and she said: "Oh, I expected you to have a strong Middle-European accent", and so I said: "Well, there you are, you see, I am sorry to disappoint you..." But I do have a strong Middle-European sense of the past, and I think a lot of it was implanted when our fathers went to the war. The war was a very significant episode in our lives, not that it affected people physically or practically, but I can remember absorbing my grandmother's reaction to it very powerfully. She came from a German family, and she was very upset when the war was declared. I remember taking in the adults' responses very keenly, even though I was a very young child (six years old) when the war broke out. And the war somehow coloured my life more powerfully than any other period. Also, of course, we were indirectly affected because my mother helped refugees from Germany, and tipped us out of our beds to put them in, we didn't really understand why. She also helped Jewish orphan children come to Australia, and she was on the board of an orphanage, and she used to take us there every week to play with the children. So that we were not unconscious that somewhere else in the world other people were being displaced and ill-treated. My mother also took me down to the prisoner-of-war ships that came in after the Japanese released the prisoners. And I saw these men get off the boat: they would weigh about six stone, and this left a tremendous impression with me; and I have come to the conclusion that childhood (early childhood) is probably the most powerful period for some writers, the one about which they write most powerfully. Their middle years they will not write particularly well about... but childhood and death are the themes which stay with me most powerfully. And I think this awareness came not just from being Jewish, but has to do also with the

kind of parents one had, the kind of awareness one had that families were displaced. Also, the fact that we were evacuated during the war! Everyone will think of this as rather funny because the Japanese of course did not really get there, but the fear and anxiety were in the air. And that anxiety has never changed as far as I am concerned; it makes me anxious also for displaced people, not just for myself.

Talking now of your career: you were first a concert pianist, and then you moved on to literature. Would you say that this was a deliberate move, or had you started writing earlier? Did you start writing at an early age?

Oh, the music and the writing do not seem to me to be so different. Naturally, the concert pianist bit is a matter of rigorous training that a child who has an ambitious parent undergoes. It is a sort of training that you could give to a mathematician, or anyone for that matter: it has got very little to do with music. I was always deeply interested in the sound of words - it is the sound first, and then the meaning. I remember, in *A Portrait of the Artist*, James Joyce talks about the comforting little rhyme which means very little. I think it goes like this:

Wolsey died in Leicester Abbey
Where the abbots buried him.
Canker is a disease of plants,
Cancer one of animals

and you have got this bouncing rhythm. He says he used to like to lie down in front of a fire, just saying these words to himself: it comforted him. It is like an incantation; I used to read poetry for this incantatory sound. It was comforting. And I used to say things to myself as a child, to make up little rhymes - you would say nursery rhymes, or little charms, or spells, which you say to yourself to soothe the silence. I remember, for example, that I used to be afraid of the dark at night, and my mother would not allow us to have a light on. But I used to look at the shadows of the trees on the blind, blowing in the wind, and they seemed to look like dragons. So I used to make up a little song about a dragon, and somehow, you know, this is a way of dealing with fear... It is interesting to me how much the beginnings of my interest in writing seem to have to do with childhood fears and with guilt, and I don't know what - I don't want to ask too much why one gets interested - but the sound and the rhythm of the human voice are terribly important to me. That is why I brought one book of poems with me, this time, a book of Raymond Carver. These poems, as poems, I suppose you would not say are particularly wonderfully crafted... but the human voice speaking is what I wanted to carry in my suitcase, and I know that once I travel I need plenty of it. Particularly when you travel in a country where you lose your language. Some people may not be so bothered about it, but I get quite desperate when I cannot speak in a language.

You recently brought out a book of poetry, called Ask Me. How do you see your own development, from Kaddish and Other Poems to this recent collection?

Well there is a previous book, before *Kaddish*. When I look back at it now, the first book, *Isaac Babel's Fiddle*, seems very odd to me; it looks very masked, and very literary. It looks like the work of someone who is struggling to get out, someone who is very defensive, very academic, very well-trained... There is meticulously crafted work in it. Yet there are only a few poems that I would like to see back again. There is humour in it, which surprises me, but it is a kind of cerebral humour: it is trying to fit into what I felt English poetry approved of, which is a sort of decorous, rather clever-clever, smart boy humour. There is also another poet trying to get out there, a poet who is trying to feel her way into some understanding of her origins. A few poems there about grandparents, and about children. That book I think is interesting from my point of view: although there are a few recent poems in it that might stand up later on, as a book I don't think it is too great. As to the second book, *Kaddish*, the long poem which gives it its title was a sort of elegy for my father, who was a very shadowy figure to me. It was a kind of exorcism: there was something I had to write about, to do with the family. It is a poem which has been interpreted by other people, and well-received; but I am not sure that I knew what I did when I did it. It took a long time to write, about eighteen months. It is also a way of working out just what this ancestral bugbear is in my background, what this thing is about being born with a religion I was never really introduced to, but which is there nonetheless. What connection have I got with those strange old traditions, those blockish letters in a language I don't understand? So I put a few lines of phoneticized Aramaic in it, and people said: "You speak Hebrew, do you?" but I don't, I only heard it. So it is all, once again, sound, incantation, and what it did to me as a child, this strange mysterious language. What have I got to do with that? And yet I have got something to do with it, but I don't know what, you see, and never knew.

I was very interested, for instance, when you said that Jews put stones on people's graves, not flowers. I didn't know that, but it interests me, because I identify very much with stones, and the stones of Indian temples have always been very pliable, and malleable to me. I am fascinated by the stones in the walls of these Tuscan fortresses. Stone has always intrigued me; the look of the Hebrewish script on the page is stony to me, it is like the building of a wall. But I cannot get past it. I use stone quite a lot as an image in my poetry, not consciously but it is there, even in the poem about Emily Dickinson: she speaks of being given a stone instead of bread. Maybe it is not uncommon to feel kinship with this obdurate tough surface, which has density and resilience. Also, I am thinking of mountains for example. When I was coming through on the train to Switzerland, I remember this feeling of almost monumental irritation with these static mountains. In other words: sometimes, when people invest things or natural objects with transcendence, it then becomes humbling in some way. But mountains strike me as incredibly unyielding and in a way irritating because they would not change. Whereas the sea is always changing, it is organic, it is moving, it is restless. It has something to do, I suppose, with the old anthropomorphic thing of looking into nature for something which ties in with one's temperament.

But to go back to this question of what made the second book different from the first, I think what happened was that, in the Ark poems, I got inside the animals and spoke through them. In other words, I felt free to do this in these poems, whereas in the first book I certainly could not have done that. I used to

just go and look at the animals, and watch them and begin to move like them. You almost become the creature that you are impersonating. And the voice that speaks through each animal is not a human voice any more but the voice of the animal speaking to its creator. And I suppose in a way I have always tried to find out if there is a transcendent presence. It comes through in the third book. As a consequence, perhaps, I am trying to get the more natural speaking tones. I am not trying consciously to do that, I think it just happened. I suppose each book has represented a kind of further breaking away from the literary, allowing myself the freedom of the longer line, more breathing space in the poem, feeling less compelled by the constrictions of art, breaking down the barriers between prose and poetry. The contemporary American writers have been quite important to me, and Whitman of course, because they give you that freedom, they give you a license not to be bound up tight in the English knots. They are free from the class imprimatur of poetry as an upper-class activity. It was very much that way when we were growing up, you know, it was the province of the privileged. And it is interesting to me that each of my works has become a kind of breaking down of what I saw as a kind of privileged background. This of course will not necessarily be accepted, because I do have the privilege of a very full and rich education - I don't mean rich economically, but a rich opportunity of many, many aspects of cultural life. This, for many people, is the mark of the aristocratic privilege of the old days, when people of my generation were privileged to have a very good education, to have books in the house, and paintings on the wall, parents who cared about such things. In Australia, it did rather single you out...

In discussing your own poetry you have referred several times to the fact that you were involved in a process of which you were not entirely conscious, and that you were doing things which you were not necessarily aware of at the time of writing. On the other hand, as a critic it is obvious that you are very rigorous, that you bring to it a very strong intellect, and I was wondering how you reconcile these two different approaches to experience when you write poetry.

Well, clearly, there is probably a bit of schizoid split going on, and I would say that sometimes those two selves were in conflict, while at other times they were more comfortable with each other. I don't particularly think of myself as an intellectual, but I feel very strongly that there is good poetry, better poetry, and best poetry, or anything for that matter. Now I know that is again not a fashionable matter to talk about, but I was very cheered up in Italy a few weeks ago, when I was reading Vasari's *Lives*, for Vasari lays down just these structures: he says there are good, better, and best painters, and he then goes into the technical reasons why this is so. He also stresses certain rules of proportion, taste and judgement... the sort of things which I know people associate with the restrictions of Augustanism, but I don't. I think there are some things which make a work of art acceptable. I mean, there are some people who rejoice in humiliating and manipulating the reader. And some people who give the reader some sort of vision of the possibilities, of the potential or the best that can be hoped for. This, I suppose, makes me sound like some sort of evangelist... but I do not mean it like that; I simply mean that in having had the

opportunity to assess intellectually what one has done intuitively, it seems to me that the artist then has a kind of artistic responsibility, to make those decisions in his or her own work. I would not prescribe it for everybody, but for myself that is the reason why I hope to be able to balance intellect and intuition. If possible; it does not always happen of course, but one hopes... And as a critic, I am very conscious that what I sense is somehow measured up to what Vasari called good, better or best.

Your reference to Augustanism, and also to what you think is right (which in a sense brings Pope to mind) makes me wonder whether you aim at a certain classical ideal; and in this, would you feel close to an Australian poet like A.D. Hope?

I find it sort of faintly comical to be associated with a classical ideal, because I think I am a thoroughgoing romantic actually. I could not be anything like A.D. Hope... But what would endear him to me would be his enormous fund of good nature and balance. In his older age he is the most tolerant and kind writer we have ever had I wish; I could be as kind and tolerant. When he was younger, actually, as I remember some of his early criticism of Patrick White, he was not so kind and tolerant... which tears me up a bit, because I think at the time I am Alec Hope's age, which is now eighty, maybe I might be kind and tolerant too.

Can we come back to your recent collection? There are poems in it about China, there are poems about India; there are also much more personal poems. Would you care to comment on this collection, and perhaps say what prompted you when you were writing those poems...

Well, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to go to these places. In the first place, I do not think I was the best traveller. I was not the most amenable traveller: I am a very nervous traveller, and I am also subject to severe bouts of culture-shock. I would like to be more receptive to a lot of things. A lot of those China poems have to do with the surreal impact of a totally alien culture on me. I was not comfortable in China for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which was the absence of language. But other reasons as well: I felt lost in this country, I felt ill-prepared for it, I felt ignorant. Apart from which, I was aware too of undercurrents of a society which struck me as repressive, restrictive... There were little things that I was noticing, that have nothing to do with political reports or anything, but finally, when the Tien-An-Men Square episode occurred, it did not take me by surprise. I had sensed trouble somehow. I just knew things were not good for these people, even Chinese people whose culture signals I would not be too good at recognizing. And I felt unhappy that in some way we went as privileged foreigners. I did not feel like that in India. Of course, I had already read quite a lot about Hinduism and Buddhism, and I went to India with a certain ease of being. Maybe this is because in India language is not a problem. And also, we were taken to the sort of places that interested me a lot. The poems I have written were actually meditations on Hindu deities; when I had the opportunity to go into those temples and feel the devout presence of people to whom those deities mattered, I felt it was a breaking down, perhaps, of my own exclusiveness. It was a good feeling to be part of something, even though you are

not actually part of it, but not to be resisting it. Whereas in China I felt resistant to the impact of a lot of things that had jagged edges to them. India had undulating flowing lines; it was a land to me of the arc and the circle, whereas China was the land of the rectangle and the square. I never particularly felt comfortable with Chinese art, for instance, whereas I always liked Indian dancing and painting. So I suppose it depends. And these poems are just long meditative poems, into which I guess some personal reflections have come. Certainly there are reflections on transcendence, and on other people's gods; because I have been breaking down the exclusiveness of religion - I tend to see all religion as having the one root, and each time I get the opportunity to observe yet another country at first hand, and find this common commonality, the one root with many stems coming off, it helps me to accept a lot more and realize that we are not at all special in any way.

Well, now that you have just published a book of poetry, can I ask you whether you have any other specific project, or how you see perhaps your development in the future?

I have no particular sense of development in the future. Sometimes we take a few steps forwards, and then a few backwards, so I am not quite sure what development means any more. I think, in fact, that at this stage of life one often regresses into a kind of childishness. I am not sure what development means, but I do know that I would like to write some short stories - I am in the middle of some of this work. One of the things that interest me now is where I am going to live to do it. I am not quite sure whether I shall be in the West of Australia or in the Eastern states. But there is an interesting saying in the Talmud, I think it says it is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free not to take it up. I often think about that when I doubt - I am very suspicious of the written word, I am getting more and more wary of language and the problem of mixed perception on the part of the reader. Of course, there is no such thing as writer's intentionality, forget that. But the fact is that you are always in a quandary when your words drop into the void; it is like dropping a stone from a great height, and you ask yourself: Will anyone hear the echo? And does it matter? It is a sort of fundamental suspicion of one's own activity, and it is a great worry, this question of language which is so often used to distort truth in public life. In private life, what do writers do? Do they just keep writing and hope? But I do not know; I have not had any response to this book yet, so I do not know what has happened.

But isn't it a question that has always haunted writers? I saw that you were reading Virginia Woolf's diary earlier on - this is something that very much obsessed her as well. But even optimistic writers are obsessed, or if not obsessed at least worried, about this question: Am I being heard, and why am I doing it? But then I suppose that there is a compulsion to write whatever the response may be.

Well, that is true, I guess it is not important really whether anyone hears it or does not hear, but the compulsion certainly exists - although, one begins to get very worried after a while... You think you have made something up, and then you find that some character recognizes himself in the material, and you are



shocked because you thought you had invented this... So all of a sudden you realize that there is a kind of blueprint built into situations, which you do not know exists - I mean, this is an intuitive thing... Let me give an example: I saw this strange family standing in the street in Brussels, a group of Moroccans, and immediately I had a story about them. Now, fortunately, if they are Moroccans they are not likely to say, Ah she knew us! But I mean why should one have to always depend on the exotic and the strange in order not to appear parasite on the people one knows? It is rather terrifying morally, what you may do to the people you know simply by writing situations which you think fictional, but in which people recognize themselves. It is terrifying, it isolates you even further...

But this is only true if you think of the immediate reaction of people to your work. After a few years, I suppose that it has disappeared altogether, no one bothers any more to identify characters, and what matters is the impression that remains in the end.

That's what one thinks! But in Australia, because the reading population is rather small and one's friends sort of extend quite far, you are in quite dangerous waters. I was thinking that the only way to get out of this situation is to put some stones in your pockets, like Virginia Woolf, and walk into the water. I think it is probably the only answer really... (laugh) ... to move away from the familiar. But it is very difficult, for you have to write about what you know. And the poems in *Ask Me* are about what I know, or what I thought I knew. What you do not know about is what often comes through in the poem, as a kind of subliminal text that you are not even aware of - but it exists, and that is perhaps what makes the poem the most interesting. I certainly felt that I spoke more truly in those poems than in the previous two books. I felt more comfortable with these poems because they were about other people, about work I had done with terminally ill (cancer) patients, and about certain deaths - there were elegies... They seem to sit comfortably for me, because they are about people I cared about. So to that extent I guess it is a more personal book, but it is a less literary book.

Thank you very much, Fay.