

First published in *The Dark Horse* no.3, 1996 (pp. 34-43)

IAN HAMILTON IN CONVERSATION

Ian Hamilton was born at King's Lynn in Norfolk in 1938 and educated at Oxford. In the sixties and seventies he was the editor of the influential little magazines *the Review* and the larger *The New Review*, and poetry reviewer for the *London Magazine* and *The Observer*. He championed the clipped, tightly-written poem, rarely more than a dozen lines in length, and became well-known for the frank acerbity of his reviewing. During this period he had the effect of stirring the late Donald Davie's ire. After completing a polemical review of Hamilton's *A Poetry Chronicle*, Davie wrote to Michael Schmidt, then editor of *Poetry Nation*: "This old warhorse feels his nostrils dilate as at the sound of trumpets, when he thinks of Ian Hamilton reading 'The University Match'." And, on another occasion: "There's no wonder we never write without mentioning Hamilton and *The New Review*.... We all have a patriotic duty to drive *The New Review* out of existence by every means in our power, and I consistently exert myself to that end." Hamilton's numerous books include *Fifty Poems* (Faber & Faber, 1988), the biography of Robert Lowell, and *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, the record of his attempted biography of that writer, which created legal precedent over the definition of 'fair use' of copyright material.

Gerry Cambridge: You began *the Review* when you were 24, in 1962. Could you tell me a little about it? Wasn't Al Alvarez involved in some way?

Ian Hamilton: Al Alvarez was semi-involved. He was in London, we were in Oxford, but the first issue had an extended conversation between him and Donald Davie. As far as I remember it we were on Alvarez's side. It was almost exactly at the time of Al's anthology, *The New Poetry*. Though Al seemed a bit extreme and ferocious to us, nonetheless, he seemed to be pointing to poets like Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Berryman, poets we hardly knew about, whereas Davie was pointing to objectivists, projectivists and so on in America. So there were two veins of American poetry, and what their usefulness might be in terms of British poetry had to be discovered. It wasn't until 1959 that any great interest was evinced in Britain about American poets. The Movement poets were rather scornful of American poets. In 1959 remember the impact of Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, and Lowell's *Life Studies*. These things were very much in the air — did British poetry need this influence from America? Some thought not at all, whereas others, like me, thought it needed it rather badly. So there was a trans-Atlantic tendency in *the Review*.

Cambridge: Was Alvarez a tutelary spirit?

Hamilton: To some extent. He was eight years older, and a powerful metropolitan figure. We admired his reviews. He seemed the toughest, cleverest, and the least easily bowled over of the London critics, and he had Lowell behind him as a figure who seemed to have done lots of the things we were hoping poetry would do here. One worried, a bit, about what Alvarez thought about the magazine when it came out, though he had no direct involvement.

Cambridge: Was it an expensive enterprise?

Hamilton: No. We just began. We were probably in some sort of financial trouble immediately. You solicited subscriptions by sending out a flyer, so people sent in subscriptions for six issues. You used this money to produce issues one and two, then found you had no money left, but owed your subscribers four issues, which the printer no longer wanted to print. *The Review* didn't get onto any sort of basis until we got an Arts Council grant. But we had all sorts of money-making schemes

... flogging manuscripts practically before we'd sent them to the printer, and we had a sale of works by people who were sympathetic to the magazine. So it was stumbling along in that way.

Cambridge: What was your print run?

Hamilton: 1200, 1500. We had about 500 or 600 subscribers. We'd come through to London with our holdalls full, to get the magazine in the key shops, armed with our invoice books, and we'd think we were real people in that world, and we'd collect the returns which of course were quite substantial. We'd go back with holdalls not that much emptier than the ones we'd arrived with. One endured a number of minor humiliations in those days. The magazine was essentially unviable — 'trading when insolvent' I think is the term.

Cambridge: When did you get Arts Council funding for it?

Hamilton: After five or six numbers. It was supposed to appear five or six times a year, but it never did. I think around number six it had perpetrated the first 'double issue', a sure sign of trouble. That means it's trying to get through its commitment of two issues using just one magazine. So the poor old subscriber instead of getting six issues, can end up getting three double issues, which are no bigger than a single issue — or not much bigger. It was also the only way you could catch up if you were behind. I remember begging the printer just to produce this next issue, because if we produced this next issue, we would then be up to six issues, and we could ask subscribers for another pile of money, which we would then use to pay for issue eight, and part of nine, so before you knew it you were nearly up to issue ten. So it staggered on. The Arts Council policy was to give you a fraction of what you asked for, so you didn't become complacent or too well fed.

Cambridge: How did you feel about Arts Council funding for magazines?

Hamilton: Equivocal about it in the ways, I suppose, that everyone does. But I prefer the idea of Arts Council funding of magazines to funding of individual writers. They could plough a lot of money to writers via magazines; in other words, make it possible for magazines like yours to pay contributors handsomely. I'd have thought that was a more democratic way of distributing money to writers. It must be very hard for small magazine editors to get the people they want to get: writers have to live. Of course, there is the over-arching discomfiture about government-funding of magazines ... the idea that your freedom's being impinged on. It never really was a practical fear, but it's in the general imagination, particularly if you're adopting a slightly adversarial posture in relation to official literature. Taking money from the centre of official literature, the Arts Council, you're bound to feel uneasy. It may even encourage in some magazines a certain combativeness to show that they're not swayed by this.

Cambridge: It gets political when you know of figures of literary power who sit on committees and decide who gets what.

Hamilton: Well, what happens when they bring out a book of poems? In our time we would have gone for it with extra vigour, just to show that we were not shackled by this obligation. But there's something slightly artificial about that, too.

Cambridge: *the Review* rapidly developed a reputation for being very forthright in its critical judgements, didn't it?

Hamilton: Yes, it was thought of as savage. I was very much under the spell of Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*, which used to attack its own contributors. It had this acerbic courage which greatly appealed to me. I thought *New Verse* was very funny, too. So we invented a character, Edward Pygge, who wrote a page at the back of *the Review*. That was the page everybody would turn to first, where somebody would get it in the neck from Edward Pygge. That was terrific fun, and made us quite a lot of enemies.

Cambridge: Who was Edward Pygge?

Hamilton: Me, and other people who joined in, but I was Edward Pygge the First.

Cambridge: I remember your reviews from the *London Magazine* and *The Observer*, and I thought: *no one now reviews in that way*. Would it be fair to connect you with Edward Thomas as a critic/reviewer?

Hamilton: Did he write sharp poetry reviews?

Cambridge: He wrote things like, "X's sonnets are so long that we can scarce believe our eyes which see only fourteen lines." (Laughter). Comparing that to "Y's speciality is the suburban fable and much of his subject matter seems to have been drawn from a pious reading of his local newspaper; it is the beast in us which brings that sense of danger to our breakfast tables", it's the same tough disenchanting tone.

Hamilton: I had a real sense that we must stop this happening, stop this flood of mediocrity in its tracks. I used to loathe the argument that poets should stick together, and scratch one another's backs, because if they didn't, then poetry, this imperilled art, would be even more imperilled, if word got out that none of the poets was any good. Bad poems actually made me indignant. I'd feel: *you call this poetry?* I'd get quite cross about it, in a way I find hard to remember. And of course there were legitimate targets. This was the point when pop culture was beginning. The Liverpool poets were getting praised and enjoyed. They had an audience. There was a sort of Leavisite/Arnoldian feeling, that the Philistines were at the gate and that poetry must be protected from poets. We liked *New Verse* for its debunking tone, though I admired Auden, its figurehead, a good deal less than Grigson did.

Taste, I now see, is a more substantial element in the business of judgement. I was much more of an absolutist then than I am now. I'm prepared now to concede that there might be various kinds of excellence in poetry, some of which I'm blind to. I felt then that there was only one sort — which I was custodian of. To some degree, there was a tactical element in that. You felt a responsibility to know what sort of poetry was right for that moment in the history of poetry, which I think only a young critic or editor can feel ... in your twenties, when you've just had ten years of one kind of poetry, what kind do you want the next ten years to be distinguished for? Having decided that what poetry needs is *this*, then anything that isn't like *this*, or attempting to be like *this*, had to be cleared out of the way. The best magazines have always had some element of that kind in them.

Cambridge: What effect can small poetry magazines have?

Hamilton: They can have very important functions at junctions of literary history. Slight re-directings can be effected by a small literary magazine, which you couldn't have in a larger periodical. This suggests that they have to be short-lived. I probably believe that five to ten years is about long enough for a poetry magazine to serve its purpose. So if there's a tendency for poetry to be shapeless and formless, for a magazine to appear at that point which argues for form and craftsmanship and to attack this other thing, can have a real bearing on what the next thing is. Magazines

of value had that function in the past. For a period, if you know what you're doing, you can have a real impact. You could write the history of 20th century poetry in terms of certain magazines.

Cambridge: After *the Review*, which lasted for ten years, you moved on to *The New Review*, which was a bigger version. It was a monthly, wasn't it?

Hamilton: Well, it was completely mad. The first issue I think had 96 pages. We'd settled for some design that took up about 1500 words a page for text, a grotesque amount — so you can see how many words you'd need to fill a 96 page magazine. Before you knew it, the next issue was supposed to be at the printer. Very rapidly, I was scraping around for stuff to put into it, rather than repelling unsatisfactory stuff. We started out very grandly paying contributors. We ended up borrowing money from them. It was a financial disaster, but we had a really good time for about five years, in Soho, and hung around the pub being literary guys. Lots of people talk about it now with affection. We produced 50 issues of *The New Review*, some of which looking back aren't bad at all. A number of good writers appeared there for the first time.

Cambridge: Have there been any recent magazines of real influence?

Hamilton: I'm a bit out of touch. You tell me.

Cambridge: There are partisan magazines in America such as *The Formalist*, and a fine magazine called *Sparrow*, which specialises in printing sonnets, in a large format, beautifully produced, and with a real sense of integrity about it, though it doesn't adopt an overtly polemical approach.

Hamilton: It must do to some extent, if it just prints sonnets. That's the kind of thing I mean — a magazine that just prints a form which is in danger of being lost altogether. Your magazine has a point, too. For a period, such magazines can have a very salutary effect. Make people aware that poems are hard to write — even something as simple as that. The tendency now is to think that they're pretty easy to write. So magazines can be useful in that way, but they can go on too long, and turn into something else. I don't know that there's much of a market for the old *New Review* monthly magazine, because a lot of the things such a magazine would do are being done in the papers. The discovery of new talent, for instance, is going on in the Sunday papers. You and I might not agree that this is talent, but there isn't that situation of someone being known about for years at the level of the little magazines before being known in the Sunday papers.

Cambridge: I find most poetry coverage in the Sunday papers, and in the broadsheets, bland. In Scotland for instance *The Scotsman* has an incomprehensible awe of some poets: it can call Robert Crawford "a Scottish master", and pronounce that he's "hailed for his shimmering intelligence". It's embarrassing all round. I may review some of MacDiarmid's essays, which he printed in *The Scottish Education Journal* in the twenties. They give an interesting perspective on the present situation, in terms of the forthrightness of his views. He's fearless. He makes no concessions nor adopts special pleading for the fact he's reviewing Scottish poetry. That sort of contrary liveliness seems to have disappeared.

Hamilton: Who are the critics you read with any admiration now?

Cambridge: I can't think of a British one with the reputation that Randall Jarrell had, or that Thomas M. Disch or Gioia now have, in America. Perhaps part of the

problem is that critics, and especially reviewers, have lost the trust of readers. Unless someone has been built up as a figure who reviews very honestly, that is, this person's opinion matters because they have exacting standards — as one felt of Jarrell — it can be hard to take them seriously. I've read reviews for instance in the *TLS* of one poet by another, and I know there are good reasons for the reviewer to give a tepid, favourable review. And that's what happens.

Hamilton: That's the kind of thing that a little magazine could expose, and should.

Cambridge: *The Dark Horse* will have to go more in that direction. But I think that if you're a poet as well as an editor it puts you in a double-bind. It's nothing to do with wanting to be part of a clique; it's in terms of your own relation to the art. Because so much of the creative enterprise is an uncertain, tentative one, when you adopt a definite programmatic stance as a critic or reviewer, you feel a bit uneasy as to what would happen to your own writing.

Hamilton: You can get too political, literary-political. But someone has to do it.

Cambridge: When you were writing all these tough acerbic reviews, did you have a sense of the ambiguity of your position?

Hamilton: Yeah, a bit. But I was writing more poetry then. It's being young, too. One has that confidence, that seriousness. One feels that this is all immensely important stuff. So one used to feel about some minor act of literary corruption that this was the worst piece of human behaviour one had witnessed all year, which nowadays you'd take for granted. To have that element of rage — you can't pretend to have it.

Cambridge: Literary magazines seem to be taken more seriously in the U.S. than here. What would you say are the differences between the U.S. and British situations?

Hamilton: Well, a lot of magazines there are connected to the University system. And if you criticise an American poet, and say he's no good, you may be saying he shouldn't get tenure, and should be fired, so you've probably to tread more carefully. Money and poetry there are locked into each other much more than they are here. When you say somebody's no good here, you're not threatening to deprive him of his livelihood and making his kids go hungry and all the rest of it. He may be losing a few poetry readings in Chesterfield, but you're not actually doing him any damage. I remember one or two acquaintances of mine in America worrying because they had a book coming out and feeling that if it got bad reviews they wouldn't get tenure. Of course the people who were reviewing them were allowed to know that this danger existed — that by giving a negative review they'd not just be making a literary judgement, but a life judgement, with awful consequences. I wouldn't like to have to function in that atmosphere.

Cambridge: Is the British poetry scene purer?

Hamilton: Money is far less in the picture here. But it's also probably much cosier here, because of geography. British poets are all pretty chummy, in a way that they weren't as I remember thirty years ago.

Cambridge: Why is that?

Hamilton: Huddling together as a neglected coterie, practicing an ill-favoured art. You can generate a certain amount of self-importance in the poetry world, as if there were no world outside the poetry world, or as if the poetry world mattered to

anything but the poetry world. Whether or not you're invited to that festival or to this reading can keep you going, and persuade you that you're engaged in some important activity. The idea of someone coming in and blowing the whistle on that, and saying, 'look, why are you bothering with this — you're no good, you never will be any good, and you might as well go away and do something else'... which is what we tended to say (laughter) — '*please go and do something else*' — would be regarded as spoiling the party.

Cambridge: So what has engendered that sub-culture here? Is it because there is a development towards what happens in America — that there are many more reading opportunities and poetry festivals, for instance, than there used to be?

Hamilton: There's more of that. Back then you had to be quite well-known to be asked to read your poetry to an audience. Now it's the day-to-day expectation of poets that they spend two-thirds of their time reading their poems aloud to crowds in village halls, or wherever. The British Council send five intrepid poets off to Bulgaria and they come back liking each other ... that's fine, but the idea of any one of those criticising the others' work in public later would be out of the question. At first I knew nobody. Poets I reviewed were just figures out there. But once you start meeting them and quite liking them, then it gives you pause. I remember particular cases, as I got to know people, when the blood from my pen was slightly diluted because I'd met this guy. It was then that I decided to stop it: I began to know too many people. It's inevitable, because you have so many interests in common. And they seem OK people, apart from this thing of writing bad poems; they just did this thing; this bad thing (laughter); so one learned tolerance.

Cambridge: When *Fifty Poems* was published, in your foreword you implied that you were a lyric poet of the 'miraculous' persuasion. What did you mean by that?

Hamilton: That I think of a genuine poetic moment as miraculous, or near-miraculous, and that that's what truly lyric poetry aspires to. I don't think of poetry as being a vehicle for discourse, or a vehicle for narrative. It sounds slightly bullshitting, but I think of its character as being close to what I imagine might be the moment of revelation for a mystic. I think I was trying to separate it from the other forms of writing which I engage in, and which I would find it much easier to define. I was also trying to explain why there were so few poems: poetry being revelation rather than something constructed. Though I have respect for the latter method of proceeding, it isn't mine. Had it been mine, then there would be more poems — but I would see them as something else ... verse, perhaps.

Cambridge: Do your ideas about inspiration mean that setting out to write a poem in formal stanzas is not something you would ever try?

Hamilton: I have done that type of thing, but for satirical purposes. I'm very interested in rhymes and half rhymes; all my poems have some sort of iambic base to them ... possibly too much so. That's the sound that's in my head. But if that sound had been a bit more regular, I would have feared that that regularity of sound implied some regularity of thought; in other words, that I knew what I was talking about, and what I wanted to say. I think modern poetry has backed away from traditional metres because of a general loss of belief and of philosophical certainty. The idea of shapeliness and regularity in poetry has been dissonant with loss of belief and with general scepticism, which of course needn't be the case.

Cambridge: Yes, it needn't necessarily follow. There was a formal poetry conference in the U.S. last year, and *Sparrow* printed a note afterwards by one of the poets there, R. S. Gwynn, who'd been teaching on the sonnet. He made the — to me, remarkable

— statement that before you wrote the sonnet you should know what it was going to be about, and what the last line was going to be. I found that an extraordinary idea.

Hamilton: Why do you find it extraordinary? Do you see the sonnet as an exploratory form?

Cambridge: Yes. You may know you're writing a sonnet, but its content is far from foreseen.

Hamilton: I think that that deep and rich familiarity with the form, that you can write in it self-expressively, without technical self-consciousness, which must have been true in the early 19th century — otherwise you wouldn't have some of Keats' sonnets — has been largely lost. The form is so distant from us now and so exotic, that anyone embarking on a sonnet would be likely to think as Gwynn says.

Cambridge: Yes, but to try to predetermine what the end is going to be before you've started seems too...

Hamilton: ...crossword-puzzle-like. It's like versification as games playing. Until the New Formalists, the only people who habitually wrote in tight metres would be light-versifiers, which implied some sort of levity or detachment. Though you have to exempt Auden. But I've never felt particularly moved by a poem of Auden's. It's to do almost with a cocksureness in his use of strict forms. He's almost saying: *I have controlled my experience as I am controlling this. I am in charge of me, I know who I am, I know the rules, and I can perform.* So questions of tentativeness, uncertainty, anguish — there's no place for them. His persona is that of a man who knows how to speak in traditional forms. The speaking voice in some Lowell poems is that of a man who doesn't know how to speak. He doesn't know that this is how it's going to turn out when he starts speaking — though of course he does, it's just an illusion. But the persona he *projects* is of uncertainty, whereas the poet of traditional forms projects the persona of certainty — you might say. That kind of thinking is what may lie behind the unfashionableness of traditional forms.

Larkin is so interesting because he managed to write in such strict metres, with such interest in rhyme schemes, without any diminution of personal sorrow or intensity. That used to make me marvel: how do you do this, how do you perform so skillfully while at the same time managing to project such hopelessness? The performance itself is a denial of hopelessness, an affirmation of technical self-assurance that the persona of the poet, with all his hopelessness in relation to life, ought not to be able to claim. Yet he is claiming it. He must be claiming it because of the ingenuity of the delivery of these hopeless thoughts. The last two stanzas of 'Mr Bleaney', which are all one sentence, are immensely skilful, and yet utterly bleak, without any consolation at all — except the skilfulness is consoling. But why should one feel that? Except one doesn't feel it first time around, nor second time around, it's only possibly third time around you think: *how come he's so skilful if he's so miserable?* Which is a ridiculous question.

Of course, with Larkin it's only afterwards that you realise he is rhyming. But if the first thing you register is, gosh, how skilful, probably the second thing you'll register is, gosh, it's not as skilful as all that, or: what is he being skilful *with*? But I think poets should all go through some course of being skilful, at least. They should all be sent off not to poetry readings but to institutions where they're taught how to do these things. Whether or not they do them is another matter, but at least they'll know what they're about. I'd bet that at least 50% of self-proclaimed poets now haven't a clue about metre, scansion, or rhyme. It's like some carpenter saying he's never banged a nail in. *I don't know how to do it but I know how to do it ...* what a mystery!

Cambridge: Do you like the idea of writing schools?

Hamilton: No, I don't really, I think it's just a way of getting poets off the streets. I'd put them into compounds (laughter)... give them really nasty basic training in metre and rhyme —

Cambridge: — to find out how many still want to be poets afterwards? —

Hamilton: — well, there is that; then set them free. At least then they'll know it's there to not do if they so choose. But not to have any idea at all about that, and yet to go about calling yourself a poet ... that's the way to kill poetry.

Cambridge: One of your poems, 'Windfalls', which was previously published as an eleven or twelve line poem, when it was reprinted in *Fifty Poems* had been cut to four lines.

Hamilton: I'm not sure that was a good idea. The poem wasn't very good to start out with; and then it got worse.

Cambridge: I didn't understand why you'd done it.

Hamilton: I had to go and look at all this twenty-year-old stuff. Some of the pieces I couldn't bear, so I cut them out. But of course people remember your bad lines as well as your good lines. It's like Spender's "I think continually of those who were truly great", which is a terrible line, but it has a certain glamour attaching to it. If you tried to make it any better, you'd make it worse. There are many lines of poetry which you remember for various reasons. Spender seems to me particularly interesting in that way. With him, it's almost all bad lines that you remember: you know, "pylons like nude giant girls". Pylons aren't like nude giant girls, it's a terrible line, it doesn't work at all. Pylons are metallic ...

Cambridge: I rather like that line.

Hamilton: Well, there you are. You wouldn't, though, I hope, contend that it was a great line of poetry. But I agree with you. I quite like that line; I remember it.

Cambridge: That pylon poem of Spender's has a certain gracefulness about it.

Hamilton: Well, come, come, there isn't much gracefulness about those girls. I wouldn't like to meet them on a dark night (laughter). But as regards the 'Windfalls' poem, I just wanted to get rid of bad things in it, but the people who knew about it knew about it in all its badness, its original splendid incompetence. I was trying to improve it, but that was a mistake, you see. Auden made the same mistake. But what was your question? — *why did you make it even worse?* Well, I was in a rather strict mood that day, and they were re-issuing this poem, so I thought I could get rid of the worst bits. I struck them out — a man of integrity — only to find I'd made it even worse. You wouldn't be able to do that unless there was something wrong in the first place. Once there's something wrong in the first place, there'll always be something wrong. It gets back to what I was saying earlier — that taste is a part of judgement. If enough people share the same taste — caprice — then what you have is an audience for that poem.

Dylan Thomas is a very interesting case in point. I could write an essay — and probably have — demonstrating that he's no good, but on the other hand I've met countless people who are haunted by Dylan Thomas. My first instinct is to say they don't know anything about poetry. But if enough otherwise discriminating people

appreciate Dylan Thomas — Empson, for example — then it gives you pause. What he used to call ‘the singing line’ is there in Thomas. I’ve no patience with that. You can’t have a ‘singing line’; it doesn’t make sense. It’s not saying, it’s singing. Part of poetry is that the saying should sound like singing, so who is this fraud who’s getting away with merely singing? I’m not at all susceptible to Thomas’s charm. Yet this whole quagmire of taste begins to seem like something one must take into account. Like your Scottish-ness inclines you to admire some rhythm that I can’t even hear, or some image that I don’t understand; it’s like an arrow into the heart, there it stays, and it can’t be removed, no matter how many critical articles you write, or whatever I’d say. It would be nice to write lines that have that sort of power, even if they turn out to be “pylons like nude giant girls” (laughter). Heaven forbid, but if that’s the way it has to be, that’s the way it has to be.

Cambridge: Let’s speak a little about biography. Do you think it’s important in giving a fuller view of a writer’s work — or just a means of satisfying legitimate or illegitimate curiosity?

Hamilton: One could think of cases, like the Larkin case, where a lot of people feel free not to read Larkin, because they’ve discovered bad things about his personality. It’s a very philistine response. Literary biography sometimes plays into the hands of the philistines, gives them the lowest common denominator, something to use against the work that they don’t anyway want to read. There’s often a decline in the reputation of a writer after his biography appears, though it can operate the other way, and lead to the rediscovery of a forgotten figure. I found after my Lowell biography that the readers of that ‘possessed’ Lowell, and they didn’t need to read the poems then — not that they would have done, anyway.

Sometimes biography can help to clarify poems. For example, Lowell’s poem, ‘Home After Three Months Away’. I’d never quite understood its opening lines. But discovering as I did the three-way relationship going on there, the fact it was addressed to the mistress and to the wife, helped clarify those lines, “Gone now the baby’s nurse / a lioness who ruled the roost / and made the Mother cry.” Something had a special significance to the girlfriend, and something had special significance to the wife, and Lowell knew they’d both read that poem. The poem became all the more poignant for me when I understood that it was written in a 48-hour break from a mental institution, so when he says to his daughter, “Dearest, I cannot loiter here / in lather like a polar bear”, that assumed a new painfulness for me when I knew he had to go back, it wasn’t that he was choosing to go back. The odds against a poem being written count when one knows the circumstances.

With Hardy, for example, you couldn’t quite respond to the poems of 1912-1913 fully, unless you realise he never really liked his wife when she was alive. One thinks of Carlyle, too. It’s excruciatingly painful when you realise that these writers only wrote lovingly about their wives when they were dead, in a way that they never did when they were alive. At its best, biography is a wonderfully useful footnoting. Not a grasping of the personality; none of us can do that. It’s a secondary activity, and quite a useful one. Too many people make too many claims for it. Too many people make too many claims against it.

Cambridge: Did the J.D. Salinger experience put you off doing biography of living writers?

Hamilton: Yes. But I don’t regret doing that book. It’s now assuming some sort of status as a document about biography. It was an unpleasant experience, which started out as a sort of joke. After Lowell, for whom I’d an excess of documentation, the idea of going in search of a writer about whom nothing was known and of whom nobody would speak, had a certain jokey attractiveness. But I made one or two quite

serious miscalculations. I thought on the basis of his texts that Salinger was a sort of gameplayer, and that I'd lure him out by sheer force of playfulness ... a massive miscalculation. He came out surrounded by lawyers.

Cambridge: You're now working on a book about Matthew Arnold. Why?

Hamilton: There are many attractions. But I'm interested in why Arnold stopped writing poetry. That happened more or less when he became the same age as his father had been when his father died, that is, in his mid-forties. People think of Thomas Arnold, the father, as this venerable Victorian, but he died in his mid-forties, of a heart attack, and Arnold was told that he, too, would die of that inherited heart weakness at around the same time. And when he got to that age, and became older than his father had ever been — this massively senior, almost oppressively admirable father, who'd been a social reformer of sorts and a man engaged in the age — I think Arnold couldn't bear the tension between his social responsibilities, as inherited from his father, and the kind of poems he was temperamentally equipped to write, personal ones. So there was a tension between the two parts of himself, one to be of the world, and the other to be not of the world; he slightly despised his own poetry as being not the sort of poetry he would have wished to write. He wanted to be an Epic poet. He always thought his poetry was rather frivolous; or to do with the emotional unreliable side of his personality, which his father disapproved of. So the father thing is very important.

So he started writing social commentary, and was brilliant at it. He arrived at ideas which still preoccupy us today: what do you do with mass literacy? Is it a good thing? Is it a bad thing? Do standards necessarily fall? How does the poet stand in relation to a new audience that can read, but that doesn't necessarily know how to read, or that knows how to read, but doesn't know what to read? Do you tell them what to read, or do you let them read whatever is there to be read? The relation between high culture and low culture, all those ideas Arnold had about that, seem to me to be still under discussion. But what most interests me is the view he took of himself. And what may be slightly new is this idea of fathers.

I've thought of writing an essay or a book about how people react when they get older than their fathers ever were. There are a number of examples: Berryman, for example, who wrote in a letter: "I am now one day older than my father had ever been"; Hemingway, similarly; Edmund Wilson, the day he became older than his father had ever been, bought a house. He'd always lived in lodgings. Arnold stopped writing poetry. They all became grown up, some way or another: I am now free to be grown up, I will now buy a house, I will now kill myself, and if I kill myself it won't be because he killed himself; it's my choice, I no longer need to quarrel with him nor to obey him, because I'm older than he ever got to be, so I'm now born again. There's something there.

I've experienced it myself to some extent. My father died at 51. When I became 52, I went up and stood beside his grave, and did a second goodbye, and thought: *now what? Now what? This is territory he never experienced, being 52.* And your life changes slightly. It was around then that the Arnold came up ... so it's to do with all that. But I also always liked some of Arnold's poems enormously; the feeling in them that he was running counter to something. But he didn't approve of the poetic in himself. After all, is it good enough simply to write poems, or should you be doing something else with your life?

Cambridge: Michael Hamburger in his book *The Truth of Poetry* talks about the distinguishing feature of the modern poet being the presence of the anti-poet — the distrustful, realist, worldly sensibility in conflict with the lyrical impulse.

Hamilton: Well, the whole of modern poetry can be seen as to do with the position

of the poet in society. The poet, if he has any sense of his own importance, it's a huge sense, of being the central figure of the tribe, the seer, the wise man. He sees his role as one of crucial significance. Yet the facts tell him that he's of no consequence at all. A lot of the early modernist poems such as 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', and indeed 'The Waste Land', are about the estrangement of the artist from the society that needs him so badly — if only it knew how much it needed him.

Cambridge: Is part of the difficulty that, by practice and inclination, the poet automatically takes poetry much more seriously than his or her audience?

Hamilton: Yes. So he has an audience of poets, and largely an indiscriminating or a dishonest audience of poets. Poets all long to be the tribal spokesman; that's in their nature. The whole pop phenomenon is a quasi-poetic undertaking — the singing of songs to large audiences, who remember those songs. This dramatic public aspect of the poet's self-image has been taken away by popular culture. So naturally these poets will go along on the coat-tails of this thing, and do their poetry readings, and try and make them rather jazzy, and lively, and entertaining. But poetry must become more separate, if it's to continue to be poetry, not just some feeble, well-educated, boring version of *that*. Don't compete with *that*. Do *this*.

'Make your companions the poets of the past' would be my message to the up and coming poet. If you want to be a poet, read lots of poetry, register how hard it is to be as good as *that* — anything near as good as *that* — and then go to it. And don't expect much, because you won't get much, next to nothing, except you might feel yourself to have earned the right to be of that company, in however junior a capacity. Ambition of this sort depends on a sense of history, of continuity. You've got to not want all that glamorous stuff very much — really not want it that much. Everybody wants it a bit. Some so-called poets, that's what they mainly want — to be Mick Jagger. They don't even *get* Mick Jagger. I get Mick Jagger more than they do.