International Journal of Educational Sciences and Arts (IJESA)

Vol. (4), No. (2)

IJESA

February 2025

المجلة الدولية للعلوم التربوية والآداب

الإصدار (4)، العدد (2)

Reporting Violence in the Poetry of James Fenton: A Journalistic Account of the Confrontation

Emad Said Elsayed Ibrahim

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shaqra University, Saudi Arabia

dr.emad.s@su.edu.sa

Abstract

The present article seeks to shed light on James Fenton's remarkable ability to report on ongoing events through poetry, which enables him to be characterized as a poet-reporter. Fenton integrates journalistic principles in his examination of political events, thereby contributing significantly to the documentation of modern history. As such, Fenton can aptly be regarded as a history reporter. This paper will center on the notion of journalistic historiography, specifically through the lens of Fenton's work in the contexts of two pivotal geopolitical locations: South Asia, and The Middle East. In the course of this study, particular attention will be devoted to the cultural features that have shaped the political circumstances of both locations. In South Asia, the poet highlights the struggle for independence and the visible decline attributed to colonial influence and related recurring violence. Concerning The Middle East, Fenton deals with the recycling of violence as he scrutinizes the cultural and political tensions in the region.

Keywords: New Journalism, History, Report Poem, Violence Recurrence, Colonialism, Narration.

Introduction

Fenton's poetry strikes an appealing balance between formal excellence and intriguing, often surprising content. He showcases a remarkable range of forms, from traditional rhymed stanzas to intentionally prosaic free verse. His poems are

characterized by their exceptional polish and the broad spectrum of topics they cover. However, Fenton's originality is less about inventing new forms or themes and more about his unique ability to blend traditional elements in compelling and often groundbreaking ways. Hence, "Fenton’s unique accomplishment has been to create a diversity of public forms–which range from political poetry to light verse, from narrative to lyric–without compromising the integrity and concentration of his work" (Gioia, “The Rise of James Fenton”). This skill has allowed him to revitalize stagnant literary genres like allegory, didactic epistle, verse satire, and pastoral eclogue into dynamic modern expressions. Moreover, Fenton is an exceptionally engaging and intelligent poet, capable of capturing the reader's interest. He has created complex, sometimes obscure poems that have nonetheless resonated with audiences and emotionally connected with them. Fenton excels in selecting words and phrasal structures pregnant double-meanings and obscurity. This ability might create "…the sometimes catastrophic distance separating words from deeds is explored in a complex adjustment of phrases and double-meanings, whose strata, in subtly different iterations, layer to create a brute escarpment of propaganda and populist will"(Whitaker, "Blood and Lead"). In Fenton's poetry there is the exploration of war in poetry which often unveils the profound pain and suffering associated with traumatic experiences expressed in a realistic directness. For Peter Porter, 'It's the way he writes, with a mixture of poetic language and real directness"(Porter 31). He frequently addresses the atrocities of conflict and violence. In this context, historical events can feel so overwhelming that they risk being expunged from collective memory. Poets often engage with historical contexts to provide insight into the human experience, using various techniques to convey complex emotions and ideas and "…there was probably not a body of historically engaged poetry more important than [Fenton's] in the latter part of the twentieth century, and critics must have been awed to reflect on how Fenton would develop from there" (Shivani, “James Fenton”). Fenton deals with his poetic career from the

stand point of a news reporter, therefore the reader can easily find the steps of reporting process applied in most of his poems dealing with the war theme. He was keen to follow stages of professional reporting that starts from; " the … finding a story and tracing sources, to interviewing contacts, gathering information and filing the finished report" (Forest 1).

Fenton's writing incorporates essential elements of New Journalism, including the use of literary techniques, a narrative approach, and a first-person perspective that highlights the author's personal experiences. Fenton shifts also to third person narration upon dealing with events he did not actually attend the making of which. In his poems "Fenton uses New Journalism techniques which place him squarely at the centre of the action, employing sometimes humorous incidental detail"(Moran56). Additionally, it focuses on individuals and events that are often overlooked or underreported. New journalism is as creative as literature:

> New journalism invested as it was in dramatizing stories, appropriated popular literary genres to frame the news for readers. Reporters and editors rewrote current events into stories laced with the familiar motifs of hoaxes, scientific and travel adventures, mystery and detective tales, and historical romances, to name just a few genres, in effect revising and resurrecting these popular fictional forms as news items (Roggenkamp xv).

The phrase "new journalism", Roggenkamp notes, was coined by Matthew Arnold in 1887. Arnold notes that "new journalism…throws out assertions at a venture because it wishes them true; does not correct either them or itself, if they are false; and to get at the state of things as they truly are seems to feel no concern whatever."(Arnold 938). For this reason, Fenton was not fond of the term journalism because he felt it suggested strict formats tied to article length and influences that might deviate from truth. Instead, he favored the term "reporting," referring to narratives about travel and foreign places, which he argued has "predated journalism". He suggests that reporting is more "natural" because it allows for the

inclusion of details that journalism often omits; it feels "alive, conscious, and has a distinct point of view" (All the Wrong Places 22).

With the intension of incorporating history with reporting through travelling to areas of historical or cultural unrest, Fenton visited locations experiencing significant political shifts or appearing on the brink of such changes to report on them. Ultimately, it's clear that Fenton is not a conventional journalist or reporter. Rather than offering detailed, moment-to-moment coverage of the historic events he observed, he concentrated on topics, incidents, and individuals that intrigued him. This approach aligns more with travel writing conventions than with what might traditionally be considered important news coverage. Fenton embraces what can be called the poetic story-aesthetics in reporting history and in the revealing of truth. Fenton writes with the aesthetics of literature mingled with that of journalism. Fenton thus, recovers the traditional association between literature and journalism. As there is:

> A natural and fluid connection existed between literature and journalism in terms of style and profession and editors and reporters alike self-consciously reinforced the ideas that one textual venue bled into the other and that the pages of the newspaper contained within them a particular literary aesthetic" (Roggenkamp xiv).

Fenton's creative writings include poetry, criticism, politics, history as well as travel. In his review on James Fenton's Yellow Tulips Patrick McGuinness notes that, " Fenton has published on politics, travel, gardening, art and literary criticism, as well as perceptive and often eye-witness journalism"(Yellow Tulips…). Fenton remains faithful to his factual self-conscious style that issues from deep desire to show truth. He is the poet-reporter who whose war poems stress again and again the connection between literature and journalism. According to Patrick McGuinness,

> [Fenton] trusts lyric but he also trusts reportage; he trusts the high style but lets the statistics do their talking too; he trusts emotion and he also trusts impersonality. Most of all, he trusts poetry to express both the historian's centuries and the reporter's minutes. (Yellow Tulips…)

Reporting events that shape history for the sake of revealing truth places Fenton in the camp of the moralists. Critics of poetry generally categorize their approaches into two primary groups: aesthetes and moralists. Aesthetic critics prioritize the craft and technical elements of poetry, often overlooking the thematic or conceptual significance of the work. Conversely, moralists, such as Fenton, not only appreciate the technical aspects of poetic composition but are also deeply engaged by the poem's content and the ideas it conveys. In a review of Fenton's book The Strength of Poetry (2001), Edward Mendelson elucidates Fenton's critical perspective on poetry:

> Fenton, in one of his characteristic asides, describes a poem by Philip Larkin as “a poem of feeling rather than thought.” However, he further expresses a desire for “clearer thoughts” within the work, underscoring the tension between emotional resonance and intellectual clarity in poetry. He adds, "I would be happier with it, though, if its thoughts were clearer." For the aesthete, poetry is a means of escape from the complexities and pain of reality ("The Strength of Poetry": The Personal Is Poetical).

Fenton never fails critics for his characteristic interest in fact and reality. Fenton' poetry is that of "pure fact", Patrick McGuinness marks such factual attitude:

> Fenton's gift lay in mixing the direct, immediate and deliberately simple eloquence of what he calls "the poetry of pure fact" with something refined and allusive. The Fenton poem homes in on details then pulls back out to take in great vistas of time and place and human movement ("Yellow Tulips…").

The discourse surrounding comparing Fenton to W.H. Auden is often characterized by clichéd observations; however, such comparisons are justified due to specific attributes inherent in their work. While Auden possessed the unique advantage of having a distinctly transformative influence on poetic form and content, the contemporary poet James Fenton faced different challenges in crafting his verse. In accounting for Fenton's style it is quite clear that,

> Fenton's technical prowess and fearless engagement with complex subject matter position him as a substantial figure in modern poetry. Particularly notable is his skillful integration of

public and private voices, as well as his innovative phrasemaking. Fenton was 'a brilliant poet of technical virtuosity (Spender 32)

A salient feature of his poetry is the pronounced emphasis on presenting objective facts with serious earnestness. Therefore, Fenton's early poetry helped "define the sound of serious poetry in our time" (Kirsch, "I am Here to Hear the Meter"). His works addressing the conflicts in Indochina and the Middle East function as forms of reportage, capturing the immediacy of experience and conveying a profound awareness of “the weight of the moment, the privilege of being a witness” (All the Wrong Places 206). Being an eye-witness sometimes appeases his anger upon seeing the atrocities of war. The traumatic history of Southeast Asia imprints "much anger in James’s writing. It began as a politically principled, righteous anger – the sort that can easily swerve into the self-righteous. Exposure to events in south-east Asia tempered it into a different kind, that of the appalled witness-bearer (Barnes, "In Praise of James Fenton").

Southeast Asia

Fenton's Southeast Asia poems engage deeply with themes of colonialism and historical context, particularly reflecting his preoccupation with the memories of war and the ramifications of imperialistic endeavors. Fenton's arrival in Indochina in 1973 coincided with a notably complex and turbulent political climate. The regimes in Phnom Penh and Saigon, subsequent to the Paris Peace Conference, were exceedingly fragile, marked by intricate ethnic dynamics and internal strife heavily influenced by various foreign interventions. "Indochina is inextricably linked to its colonial past. Southeast Asia is unusual in consisting of areas governed by virtually all the main colonial powers – Britain, France, Holland, Spain, Portugal and the US" (Anderson xv). In his introduction to All The Wrong Places, Fenton wrote that he has chosen Indochina "partly on a whim"(All The Wrong Places 3), having read a few books but knowing little of the place, and admits that his revolutionary political

beliefs then were combined with a more basic touristic urge: "I wanted very much to see a communist victory. I wanted to see a war and the fall of a city because … because I wanted to see what such things are like" (All The Wrong Places 13). However, many of Fenton's poems about Indochina concern the acquisition of new knowledge and the moving him to re-evaluate his first stance.

"Dead Soldiers", from The Memory of War (1982), is a poem-cum-reportage initiated from Fenton's own diary entries. "Dead Soldiers" vividly depicts an unexpectedly refined lunch on the battlefield that reporter Fenton shared in 1973 with Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey, the military governor of Cambodia. This poem exemplifies journalistic poetry, as it conveys various ideas through metaphors and symbols while preserving the clarity and reliability of news reporting. During the event, the poet observes the happenings both inside and outside the camp with the keen and analytical perspective of a journalist. According to Dana Gioia, "the poem serves as both a journalist's recounting of this encounter and a reflection on the challenges a foreigner faces in grasping the intricacies of Cambodian politics, all conveyed in a detached, factual tone" ("The Rise of James Fenton"). In a narrative new- journalistic style, Fenton begins the report by recounting,

> When His Excellency Prince Norodom Chantarainngsey
> Invited me to lunch on the battlefield
> I was glad of my white suit for the first time that day. (white skin)
> They lived well, the mad Norodoms, they had style.
> The brandy and the soda arrived in crates. (westernized)
> Bricks of ice, tied around with raffia,
> Dipped from the orderlies' handlebars. (SP, 19)

"Dead Soldiers," Seamus Heaney notes, works "by masquerading as anecdote and report, it unmasks what is terrible in an apparently normal situation and in this case the civility of tone does indeed heighten and reveal the barbarity of the action"

("Making It New"). The poem describes a strange encounter in Cambodia where Fenton is invited to a "lunch on the battlefield" by a nephew of Prince Sihanouk Norodom. The narrator's reference to his being "glad of" his "white suit" bears an indirect indication of his white skin as one who relates to the European colonizer. Fenton, a European, journalist, still has the western presupposed superiority in his mind. This is reinforced by the Norodoms' extravagant show of luxury at lunch served in the colonizer's French tradition, supposedly the tradition of the enemy, where "brandy "and "soda arrived in carets". Fenton is a master of creating hints and understatement hiding deep ideas. In his poems, Seamus Heaney points out that Fenton, "was marking the desire of poets to regroup around the aesthetic of "common sense and understatement" ("Making It New").

During the meal, the nephew finds himself seated between Norodom and his aide, who is unexpectedly revealed to be the estranged brother of Saloth Sar, better known as Pol Pot. The extravagant meal includes frogs' legs, pregnant turtles, and "banana salad", while "APCs," or Armored Personnel Carriers, are firing into the sugar palm trees. Fenton continues:

> And I remember the dazzling tablecloth
>
> As the APCs fanned out along the road,
>
> The dishes piled high with frogs' legs
>
> Pregnant turtles, their eggs in the carapace,
>
> Marsh irises in fish sauce
>
> And inflorescence of a banana salad.
>
> ………………………………….
>
> …………………………………..
>
> On my *left* sat the Prince;
>
> On my *right*, his drunken aid.
>
> The frog's thighs leapt into the sad purple face

https://doi.org/10.59992/IJESA.2025.v4n2p4 E-ISSN 2976-7237

Like fish to the sound of a Chinese flute.

I wanted to talk to the Prince. I wish now

I had collared his aid, who was Saloth Sar's brother.

We treated him as the club bore. He was always

Boasting of his connections, (SP, 20)

The phrases "on my left" and "on my right" highlight the significant international interplay and interference in Cambodia, where opposing Right and Left factions have engaged in numerous skirmishes over the issue of polarization. The capitalist orientation uncovers submergence in westernization while the causes for the war reveal other socialist inclinations. The image of "the frog’s thighs" leaping into the mouth of the "sad purple face" of the drunken aide treated as the "club bore", seems to denote the decadence of the leaders who fought for an anticolonial cause. The connotative significance of the dishes served adds to the elucidation of the meaning intended. Fenton employs the symbolic power of the "Frog's thighs", "pregnant turtles", and "their eggs" to enhance the meaning. "Frog thighs" can symbolize the dissected parts of the killed soldiers in war, while "pregnant turtles [and] their eggs" symbolize the Norodoms' merciless killing of the hapless people just for pleasure regardless of the result. The Norodoms exhibit behaviors similar to their French colonizers, even sharing a penchant for eating frog legs. The true fighters are the impoverished soldiers, whose fallen comrades are represented as empty wine bottles; once drained of life, they are discarded. Patrick McGuinness highlights this point:

> The "dead soldiers" in question are what they called the empty bottles of Napoleon brandy that piled up at their feet. The joke, and it's a dark joke, isn't just in the "dead soldiers" but in the face of Napoleon that adorns the labels, reminding us that history doesn't just repeat itself, but that it rhymes in ways that are both duff and deadly (“Yellow Tulips …”).

The overall scene introduces a mimicking of colonial decadence characteristic of the white man's boastful superiority over the colonized. The drawn image introduces the attendants carrying ice packs on their handlebars, and each diner attended by "one of

the other ranks / Whirling a table-napkin to keep off the flies". Reflections about such kind of decadence echo in Anis Shivani's words:

> In "Dead Soldiers," when Fenton reflects that "They lived well, the mad Norodoms, they had style," he is acting as willing participant in history, able to handle its absurdities…without archness or self-reproach. His perception at this early stage allows for the cyclical nature of decline and crisis without any shade of sentimentality ("James Fenton").

The poem serves as both a journalistic recount of the incident and a reflection on the challenges a foreigner faces in grasping the intricacies of Cambodian politics. It is delivered in a calm, factual manner. Fenton skillfully transforms journalistic writing into poetry through subtle details, particularly through sharp puns and double meanings that are intricately integrated into the clear narrative. For instance, the prince's luxurious French brandy symbolizes the excess and cruelty of his regime.

> On every bottle, Napoleon Bonaparte
>
> Pleaded for the authenticity of the spirit.
>
> They called the empties Dead Soldiers
>
> And rejoiced to see them pile up at our feet. (SP, 19)

The Cambodian leader referred to as "Napoleon Bonaparte" supports the suggestion that Norodom shares much with the French colonizer. Influence, this time, comes to the surface not only in adopting the colonizer's taste for dishes and food serving, but also in practicing the military violence associated with the French colonies in Southeast Asia. Fenton effectively mirrors the dilemma faced by the Western anti-socialist Left during the cold-war. He regrets the complex interplay of Marxism and nationalism in Indochina. In "Dead Soldiers", "Fenton's poetry thus revisits the Western anti-Stalinist Left's dilemma in the 1960s and 1970s concerning Indochina's problematic amalgam of Marxism and Nationalism"(Moran 56). As socialist, Fenton is openly anti-nationalistic; nevertheless he has expressed sympathy and support for national liberation movements resisting American imperialism. In the poem, and as Fenton elaborates on the imperialist influence, he reveals that he does not really know

the situation. In an anti-climactic turn, the poet discovered that the characters he met and the events he witnessed opposed the framework logics his Western mindset has imagined:

> … we were always wrong in these predictions.
>
> It was a family war. Whatever happened,
>
> The principals were obliged to attend its issue. (SP,21)

The persons he imagines to be corrupt turn out to be dedicated to their cause, and he proves even more misguided in his views of their enemies. While he harbors certain reservations regarding the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge, he nonetheless endorses their struggle against colonial oppression. Fully aware of the challenges experienced during the 1930s, he is resolved to avoid a tendency to attributed undeserved victories for the comrades. And although Fenton,

> admired the disciplined way in which the VietCong took Saigo at the time, he later accuses himself of 'political opportunism' in seeking to 'hitch a ride on the winning tank, just a few yards before the palace gates,' and admits that he later 'gr[ew] to loathe the apparatchiks who were arriving everyday with their cardboard suitcases from Hanoi'. If Fenton retrospectively qualifies his sympathy for the Vietcong, he comes to regret even more deeply his support for the Khmer Rouge (Moran 59).

In 'Out of the East,' from his collection, Out of Danger (1994), Fenton elaborates on the Cambodia theme. The title poem in "Out of the East" is a ballad, with a narrator and chorus. “Out of the East” is arguably the most poetically compelling piece of war poetry by Fenton, as it is the only poem that addresses war directly. It utilizes a traditional ballad structure, consisting of (abab) rhymed quatrains interspersed with longer stanzas that serve as a recurring chorus, repeated four times for each cardinal direction. This combination of an old European poetic form with a contemporary, non-European conflict creates a striking universal appeal. However, this approach may overshadow the poem's actual content; the poem is one of a number by a Fenton that “seem to screen the historical turmoil they describe behind a range of verbal

effects – insistent rhythms, inventive rhymes and word play”(Moran 61). As a result, the poem may come across as excessively musical—so much so that it can feel too enjoyable to adequately convey the seriousness of its themes, especially since it was also part of a song cycle. The poem expands on the universal concept of poetic form by narrating the story of a soldier in a vague manner, representing the experience of an average soldier. The soldier remains unnamed, and there is a lack of specific details regarding time or location. The events described have a somewhat artificial structure due to the poem's own format. Aside from a few elements, the poem could easily apply to any modern conflict rather than just Cambodia. This contrasts sharply with Fenton’s journalism, which always emphasizes concrete and specific details.

The narrator, a soldier from the Khmer Rouge, recounts the rebel army’s extensive trek from the jungles near the Thai border to Phnom Penh. The poem highlights the various factions engaged in conflict in Cambodia, including Lon Nol’s forces, the Khmer Rouge, and both North and South Vietnamese troops. Additionally, it notes the US invasion of Cambodia in 1970.The solders with the narrator form a band representing a chorus warning the audience:

> Out of the South came Famine.
>
> Out of the West came Strife.
>
> Out of the North came a storm cone 61
>
> And out of the East came a warrior wind
>
> And it struck you like a knife. (SP, 62)

The poem suggest that the particular side the soldier is on is not explicitly stated, yet it can be inferred to be the Khmer Rouge, considering the narrator's journey from the jungle to Phnom Penh, which involves actions such as obstructing the Mekong River and assaulting Pochentong airport. The soldier's ideological reasons seem to hold little significance, as they are not addressed; rather, the emphasis is placed on the fight for survival in a dangerous and tumultuous war. Similar to “Dead Soldiers,” the

poem highlights the disconnect between the high-ranking officials and the actual experiences of the ordinary soldiers, illustrated by lines such as;

> And it's a far cry from the jungle
> To the city of Phnom Penh
> And many try
> And many die
> Before they can see their homes again (SP, 62)

The soldier seems to be forcibly taken from his village: "Next year the army came for me / And I was sick and thin." The soldier "is partially a victim of war, he is also compelled to kill former friends and partake in atrocities"(Moran 61). The soldier is repeatedly brain washed by repeatedly spoken to of "victory". Ironically "a foreign" invading "soldier" gave him a gun and spoke of victory:

> A foreign soldier came to me
> And he gave me a gun
> And the liar spoke of victory
> Before the year was done. (SP, 63)

Fenton characterizes war by likening its frequency to that of natural phenomena. The central metaphor in the poem likens war to natural phenomena, particularly weather events like storms and winds. It suggests that war is an occurrence that impacts everyday people, who have little control over it, and that they become mere victims of larger historical forces.

> Out of the West came thunder
> But it came without a sound
> For it came at the speed of the warrior wind
> And it fell on the heart
> And it fell on the soul

And it shook the battleground, (SP, 63-4)

This idea highlights the poem's portrayal of amorality, as "we cannot hold natural forces accountable for the fatalities they bring about. The soldier engages in was without feeling of any moral outrage” (Moran 62). This idea of lacking control can also apply to nations; although the conflict primarily took place in Cambodia, the involvement of other countries, mainly the United States and Vietnam, significantly influenced its trajectory. The poem references this international dimension of the war several times, most notably in certain lines.

Out of the North came an army …

Out of the South came a gun crew …

Out of the West came Napalm’ (SP, 65)

The general direction pointing to the East in lieu of explicitly defined regions contributes to a notable ambiguity in the text, an inscrutability that permeates the entirety of the poem. A salient illustration of this is found in the concise manner in which Fenton delineates the Khmer Rouge's orchestration of Prince Sihanouk serving as a puppet under the autocratic governance of Pol Pot. This portrayal not only highlights the complexity of political maneuvering but also reflects the broader themes of power and exploitation inherent in the regime's actions.

We have brought the king home to his palace.

We shall leave him there to weep

And we’ll go back along the paddy track

For we have promises to keep.

For the promise made in the foxhole,

For the oath in the temple yard,

For the friend I killed on the battlefield

I shall make that punishment hard. (SP,67)

https://doi.org/10.59992/IJESA.2025.v4n2p4 E-ISSN 2976-7237

These atrocities are committed by the narrator soldier under the persuasiveness of his superiors and the exigencies of war to kill his former friends and allies. The poem introduces a tragedy in which friends can raise armies against each other in the violent circumstances of the civil war that creates a general sense of violence as breeding violence and the desire for revenge. The poem concludes with a cycle of death that repeats alongside the recurring shine of the "sun" marking the beginning of a bloody "day";

> Out of the East there shone a sun
>
> As the blood rose on the day
>
> And it shone on the work of the warrior wind
>
> And it shone on the heart
>
> And it shone on the soul
>
> And they called the sun Dismay, my friend,
>
> They called the sun – Dismay. (SP, 68)

The sunrise emerging from darkness serves as a literary symbol of hope and tranquility, while the connotations of the term "rose" suggest agreement and the resolution of conflict. Nevertheless, the narrative concludes without any clear sign of lasting peace. Fenton's diction "wears the appearance of a simplicity which is ingeniously betrayed on second and third readings"(Whitaker, "Blood and Lead"). Fenton plays on the word "rose," which, as a noun, refers to a flower, and as a verb, represents the past tense of "rise." Consequently, the tale of war culminates in the expectation of recurring bloodshed in the future, described as "Dismay." The recurring phrases that begin with "And" further emphasize the ongoing cycle of violence.

The Middle East

Fenton's "Dead soldiers" from his collection The Memory of War (1982) and "Out of the East" from Out of Danger (1994) feature the theme of war in Southeast Asia. Fenton continues his exploration of historical turmoil and conflict, this time, in the Middle East in "Jerusalem" and "The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah" from Out of Danger. In this regard, Fenton's "poems … are integrated into a body of work that's defined by the continuity of its commitments"(McGuinness).

In "Jerusalem", Fenton reintroduces his historical cynicism. This time he starts telling the story of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Fenton could have been very well influenced by the Palestinian riots in the Gaza strip and West Bank due to the Israeli cruelties against the Palestinian. In response the armed Israeli forces claimed nearly a thousand lives. Jerusalem serves as a focal point for ongoing misunderstandings shaped by varying historical narratives, with each group disputing the histories of the others. The main character most probably an Arab, and in first person narration puts his hand on the origin of the conflict:

> My history is proud.
>
> Mine is not allowed.
>
> This is the cistern where all wars begin,
>
> The laughter from the armoured car. (SP, 56)

However, the poem does not refer explicitly to these events. The poem has an initial situation of unrest and riot between opposing factions where "stone cries to stone", and ends with continuation of violence ignited among the conflicting parties, the "us" and "them", where each claiming the city to be theirs:

> This is us and that is them.
>
> This is Jerusalem.’ (SP, 21)

The poem opens with a reference to the Intifada as the poet hints at the Israeli violence leading to the Palestinian riot. The Israeli forces capture Palestinians to start the "interrogation" that "will not die" ultimately leading to the stoning of the Israeli troops in the occupied lands. Through the skillful phrase "stone cries to stone", Fenton creates his first religious allusion referring to the stone Wailing Wall that dates from about the 2nd century BCE. Here the word "stone" has linked the three combating factions on the ownership of the city; the Muslims, the Christians, and the Jews. Each group adopts the narrative of its religion:

> Stone cries to stone,
>
> Heart to heat, heart to stone,
>
> And the interrogation will not die
>
> For there is no eternal city
>
> And there is no pity
>
> And there is nothing underneath the sky
>
> No rainbow and no guarantee-
>
> There is no covenant between your God and me. (SP, 57)

To emphasize the violent atmosphere in the region, Fenton presents a Jerusalem divided into "us" and "them," highlighting the ongoing crisis regarding the city's political and religious identity. Each group has a different faith in mind and each says to the other: "there is no covenant between your God and me". Further referring to the multicultural situation of Jerusalem, Fenton resorts to archeology:

> The poem stresses the cosmopolitan nature of Jerusalem in which the three revelatory religions meet as there are references to Golgotha, Gethsemane, the Emperor Hadrian and the Holy Sepulcher taking Jerusalem from its geographical context to a vaster symbolic one" (Moran 67).

It is evident that the symbolic significance of Jerusalem surpasses the actual geographical characteristics of the city. Jerusalem’s symbolic meaning is more significant than the geographical reality of the city itself. This fact invites an

exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of Jerusalem's identity—both as a physical place and as a potent symbol in the collective consciousness of various cultures and religions. Therefore, Fenton tells of Jerusalem as a city "on the move", a place that challenges all attempts of forcing on it a specific affiliation:

> Jerusalem itself is on the move.
> It leaps and leaps from hill to hill
> And as it makes it way it also makes it will. (SP, 57)

Fenton articulates a position regarding the complexities surrounding the issue of Jerusalem, emphasizing the inherent challenges of achieving a definitive resolution without fostering an environment of tolerant coexistence among the conflicting parties. He posits that the diverse stakeholders involved in the Jerusalem debate should retain their autonomy while simultaneously embracing a degree of acceptance of the city’s cosmopolitan essence. The notion of amalgamating these distinct groups into a singular, dominant entity is unlikely to address the underlying issues effectively. This perspective aligns with Edward Said's critique of traditional Marxist interpretations of history. Marxism views decolonization as a progressive endeavor that aspires to culminate in complete emancipation; however, it is critical to recognize that ideological remnants will persist within formerly colonized societies.

Fenton is thus an advocate of the impossibility of clear cut dissolution of the issue of Jerusalem on the political level and away from the possibility of tolerant coexistence which sounds too idealistic. The realistic option is the possibility of the conflicting parties over Jerusalem to retain autonomy espoused with a degree of acceptance of the cosmopolitan nature of the city. Submerging the different parties into one entity representing the colonizer will never solve the problematic situation. This finds complete accord with Edward Said's critique of orthodox Marxist views on history. Marxism considers decolonization as a progressive project aiming finally to

https://doi.org/10.59992/IJESA.2025.v4n2p4 E-ISSN 2976-7237

complete emancipation. However, the ideological influence will remain lingering in the previously colonized states.

In a similar context, Edward Said critiques Marx's analysis of British rule, highlighting its detrimental effects on India. The British rule was "… romantic and even messianic: as human material the Orient is less important than as an element in a Romantic redemptive project" (Said 154). The Marxist project which works on "universalizing [the] narrative of the unfolding of a rational system of world history is simply a negative form of the history of European imperialism, [that turns out to be] representing a kind of neo-colonialism"(Young 112). Yet, "…whether or not one agrees with these arguments, they provide a useful insight into Fenton's poetry, much of which is concerned with the problems of imposing a Western dialectic on a uniquely non-Western situation"(Moran 64). As an anti-imperialist writing on imperialistic themes Fenton mixes his anger with irony as Edward Mendelson points out: "Fenton displays anger only about political issues like imperialism, and, having reported from wartime Vietnam, he has seen a lot to be angry about. He is coolly ironic when he detects imperialist motives" ("The Strength of Poetry": The Personal Is Poetical).

In "Jerusalem" Fenton elaborates on the theme of violence as a result of a complexity of cultural and political issues. The poem never shows or suggests any kind of involvement of the poet or the reader in the conflicts described. Fenton handles the theme from the point of view of the foreign journalist or tourist. The objectivity Fenton seeks could sometimes be interpreted as unsympathetic. "Jerusalem" shows the indecisiveness of the poet's attitude towards the Palestinian issue. The reader can find a clear reference to the Intifada in:

> I'll stone you. I shall break your every limb.
>
> Oh I am not afraid of you
>
> But maybe I should fear the things you make me do. (SP, 57)

Fenton is blamed for misrepresenting the riots, as previous lines implicitly refer to the stone throwing of the Palestinians but not to the use of guns by Israeli troops. Fenton enjoys,

> …the luxury of being uninvolved or, worse still, involved in an entirely different (touristic?) enterprise … the poet's ability to literally divorce and isolate Jerusalem from the urgent and catastrophic political realities of the area is symptomatic of the unquestioned privilege that he enjoys as classed-gendered- raced regioned outsider. (Parakrama, 112–13)

Fenton was keen not to introduce a decisive attitude in the poem affirming it to mean anything definite enough to be described as openly anti-Palestinian. Claiming a secure position, Fenton in "Jerusalem" resorts to the disinterestedness which is the haven of objectivity. Fenton's poetry demonstrates a strong commitment to the narrative function of verse," emphasizing elements such as 'obviousness' and 'extrinsic interest.' These characteristics indicate that his intent is far from mere self-satisfied contemplation" (Moran 62). The obliqueness of a direct intension: the sheer lack of information can seem like a refusal to interrogate specific contexts. However, Fenton is not an advocate of art for art's sake. In affirmation of this argument, Patrick McGuinness writes:

> He trusts lyric but he also trusts reportage; he trusts the high style but lets the statistics do their talking too; he trusts emotion and he also trusts impersonality. Most of all, he trusts poetry to express both the historian's centuries and the reporter's minutes ("Yellow Tulips …").

Fenton does not approach his writing purely with the intention of propaganda. His objective viewpoint can also be applied to his perspective on the role of art. From a Victorian standpoint, art should equally convey moral values and aesthetic beauty. Moreover, "although it is worth noting that he was referring to a particular kind of poetry, one of 'self-satisfied contemplation' which could never be equal to the challenge of the 'absolute reification' of totalitarian society" (Adorno 34). Fenton writes poetry that encourages contemplation and often reflects a sense of

complacency, emphasizing his personal satisfaction and beliefs. His work does not align with the demands of propaganda from any particular regime.

Fenton's critical perspective on the ethics of contemporary journalism engenders skepticism towards any form of fanaticism, whether it is religious or political in nature. Additionally, Fenton expresses a profound distrust of progressivism in the context of historiography. The progressives sought to come to terms with the extreme concentration of wealth at the hands of tiny elite who possess enormous economic and political power. Rather he advocates for the concept of historical recurrence, positing that the past perpetually reasserts itself, using the enduring religious and political conflicts in Jerusalem as a salient example. Fenton's interpretation of history accords with the concept of the recurrence of the past, and that "… history has his face forever 'turned toward the past. Where we [get involved in perceiving] a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (Benjamin 259). Fenton conceives history as eternally oriented towards the past and repeats itself. The experience of violence in Jerusalem duplicates in Iran.

"The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah", touches upon the Fundamentalist revolution in Iran. In the poem, Fenton shifts from first person narration to third person narration. In this the poet indicates that he did not visit Iran. "The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah" subtitled "An Old Persian Legend" recounts the story of Khomeini's life. The poem is an example of "presenting the past and present of Asia and the Middle East as one of perpetual bloodshed, chaos and despotism" (Moran 65). The poem tells about Imam's exile from Iran in 1964 up to the war between Iraq and Iran. In the poem Fenton tells of violence-narrative cycle that never ends. The whole deal started with "stabbing" and the son of the murdered has the vision of "the man who'd killed his father swinging high" in retribution:

> It started with a stabbing at a well

Below the minarets of Asfahan.

The widow took her son to see them kill

The officer who'd murdered her old man.

The child looked up and saw the hangman's work-

The man who'd killed his father swinging high. (SP, 70)

The simple and child-like, yet deceptive language used throughout the poem ironically hides a hostile truth. Such a truth which would be too hard to bear if recounted in more conformist words. Moreover, referring to ancient names such as Persia, Babylon and Persepolis in the poem helps to distance the reader from the immediacy of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. However, the archaic reference may serve to point to such ever-occurring conflicts, thus the poet here risks reproducing what Edward Said calls ‘the imaginative demonology of “the mysterious Orient" (Said 26). Technically, Fenton echoes the recurring nature of historical narratives by the use of recurring refrains:

> Fenton makes ironic use of songlike refrain to suggest the inescapable repetitions of history, and uses the ballad form to plunge us directly into a timeless story of warring ideologies and ruthless retribution. There is no room here for heroic or tragic individualism, only the endless replacement of one abstract noun with another – “tyranny”, “dynasty”, “villainy”, “policy” (McCulloch, "The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah" Introduction).

Violence creates a constant turning cycle; once it starts, it persists, particularly among intolerant generations:

All this was many centuries ago –

The kind of thing that couldn’t happen now –

When Persia was the empire of the Shah

And many were the furrows on his brow. (SP, 70)

Fenton’s earlier Cambodian poems contained a kind of redeeming tone which has shifted in "The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah," to anarchic one. The cycle of tyranny and despotism is occurring repetitively. Technically Fenton "loves the use of

refrains, and is highly ironical in his use of songlike repetitions, and, all ironies aside, this can make him read sometimes like a frustrated librettist" (Metcalf, "Informal Menace"). The italicized lines function as a chorus and refrain supporting an ironic singing mood throughout the poem:

From felony

to robbery

to calumny

to rivalry

to tyranny

to dynasty

to villainy

…………(SP, 72)

This also suggests the complete absence of meaning. They may imply that the defeat of despotism only ever succeeds in producing tyranny of a different kind. Again, the poet puts stress on the fact that violence reproduces itself. And after becoming in power, the Imam sent the little children out to war:

He sent the little children out to war.

They went out with his portrait in their hands.

The desert and the marches filled with blood.

The mothers heard the news in Asfahan.

Now Babylon is buried under dirt.

Persepolis is peeping through the sand.

The child who saw his father's killer killed

Has slaughtered half the children in the land. (SP, 72)

In "The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah, Anis Shivani writes," Fenton openly indulges in myths of perpetual Near Eastern violence. Historical cyclicism is now

presented as cultural pathology("James Fenton").Irrespective of the arrangement of elements, the outcome remains consistent. The reordering of the East's enduring lamentation, much like variations in writing, leads to the same thematic essence. The East's eternal wailing will go on forever. Sing the melody how you will, it doesn't matter. The poem ends with an invitation for the reader to arrange and rearrange as the reader wills only to discover that the words there remains conveying the same meaning:

> The song is yours. Arrange it as you will.
> Remember where each word fits in the line
> And every combination will be true
> And every permutation will be fine:
> *From policy to felony to fear*
> *From litany to heresy to fire*
> *From villainy to tyranny to war*
> *From tyranny to dynasty to shame (SP, 72-3)*

The paralleled structures formed of a series of "from…to" phrases emphasize the cyclicist nature of violence. Permutations and combinations of the cycled of such word as " *policy* " " *felony* "," *war* "," *tyranny* ", until " *shame* " are allowed and true. It is now clear that,

> James Fenton [is] politically aware and morally rigorous poems are a powerful response to this continuing story of violent upheaval in our own more recent history. In his poems, James Fenton bears witness to the collective traumas of the 20th century, and for generations to come his poems will be read and reread for the way they transform that experience into art (Enniss, "Harry Ransom Center Acquires Archive of Poet James Fenton").

In the revealing of these traumas Fenton provided open ended stories in his cum reportage poems introduced in a narrative technique pertinent to new journalism. In this fashion Fenton's reporting career creates such kind of poetry that reveals a

notable tension between its historical grounding and its intentional literariness merging the aesthetics of journalism with that of literature.

Conclusion

This article explores James Fenton's work, highlighting the intricate connection between poetry of historical theme and journalism. This connection enables him to capture the complexities of historical events and their emotional impact through verse. By approaching political and cultural phenomena in South Asia and The Middle East with both artistic flair and journalistic rigor, Fenton revitalizes traditional poetic forms while addressing urgent contemporary issues. His unique blend of narrative techniques and personal perspective not only highlights underreported stories but also engages readers on a profound level. Fenton's distinguished ability to document modern history through poetry reinforces the essential role of literary expressions in processing and remembering traumatic events, thus ensuring that the intricacies of human experience remain alive in collective memory. Ultimately, his work serves as a poignant reminder of the power of poetry to articulate the human condition amidst the chaos of conflict and change.

The article has sought to prove that James Fenton's poetry embodies a distinctive convergence of artistic expression and journalistic inquiry, positioning him as a significant figure in the realm of modern historiography. Through his adept use of various poetic forms and techniques, Fenton brings to life the intricate historical and cultural narratives of South Asia and the Middle East, highlighting the struggles, tensions, and complexities that define these regions. His work transcends mere observation; it delivers powerful insights into the human experience, effectively capturing the emotional weight of conflict and the nuanced realities of political upheaval. Fenton's approach, grounded in the principles of New Journalism, allows him to engage deeply with the subjects he tackles, transforming them into compelling narratives that resonate with readers. By blending personal experience with rigorous

reporting techniques, he not only documents historical events but also reinvigorates the poetic form, making it a vehicle for contemporary discourse. As such, Fenton's contributions to poetry and reporting underscore the vital role of literature in processing and understanding the human condition amid chaos and turmoil. His legacy is a testament to the capacity of poetry to illuminate the shadows of history, offering both reflection and clarity to our collective memory.

Works Cited:

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* , The Viking Press, New York, 1963.Print.
- Arnold, Matthew. "Up to Easter." *Nineteenth Century* 21 (1887): 629–43.
  "Around the World." New York World, November 14, 1889.
- Barnes, Julian. "In Praise of James Fenton", The *Guardian*, Web. 22 Feb 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/07/julian-barnes-in-praise-of-james-fenton
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in idem, Illuminations,ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn ,London, 1973. Print.
- Enniss, Steve. "Harry Ransom Center Acquires Archive of Poet James Fenton." Web. Mar 28, 2023. < https://news.utexas.edu/2023/03/28/harry-ransom-center-acquires-archive-of-poet-james-fenton/>
- Fenton, James. *All the Wrong Places: Adrift in the Politics of the Pacific Rim*, The Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1988. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Hereafter *All the Wrong Places*, with page numbers in brackets.
- Fenton, James. *Selected Poems*, Farrat, Straus and Giroux, New York,2006. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Hereafter *SP*, with page numbers in brackets.
- Forest, Chris. *Reporting for Journalists*, Routledge, UK, 2010. Print.
- Gioia, Dana. "The Rise of James Fenton." *The Dark Horse* No. 8 Autumn, 1999. No. 9&10 Summer 2000. Web. 18 Aug. 2013. <http://www.danagioia.net/essays/efenton.htm>.
- Heaney, Seamus. "Making It New." Rev. of Children in Exile: Poems 1968- 1984 by James

Fenton. The New York Review of Books. 25 Oct. 1984. Web. 13July2024. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/oct/25/making-it new/?pagination=false>.

- Kerr, Douglas. "Orientations: James Fenton and Indochina." *Contemporary Literature* 35.3 (Autumn 1994): 476-91. Print.
- Kirsch, Adam. "I am Here to Hear the Meter" Web. June 2022. <:https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/14/poetry.highereducation?CMP=share_btn_url>.
- McCulloch, Andrew. "The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah." Introduction, Web. Aug. 2024. <:https://www.the-tls.co.uk/regular-features/poem-of-the-week/the-ballad-of-the-imam-and-the-shah-james-fenton>.
- McGuinness, Patrick. "Yellow Tulips by James Fenton – Review." *The Guardian*. 7Sep. 2012. Web. 15 Aug. 2023. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/07/yellow-tulips-james-fenton-review>.
- Mendelson, Edward. "The Strength of Poetry: The Personal Is Poetical." July 15, 2001,*The New York Times*, Web. Mar.2022 <https://mendelson.org/fenton/fenton.html>.
- Metcalf, Stephan. "Informal Menace." Web.Jul. 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/books/review/Metcalf.t.html>.
- Moran, Joe. "Out of the East: James Fenton and Contemporary History. " *Literature & History* 9.2 (October 2000): 53-68. Print.
- Roggenkamp, Karen. Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction, Kent state University Press, 2005, Kent. Print.
- Shivani, Anis. "James Fenton Early and Late." Rev. of Selected Poems by James Fenton. Michagin Quarterly Review. Vol. XLVI. No.4. Fall 2007. Web. 16 Mar. 2021. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0046.420;rgn=main;v iew=text;xc=1;g=mqrg>.
- Parakrama, Arjuna. "The Art of (W)riting Oneself Out of Danger: Review of Out of Danger." *Critical Quarterly*, 36:2 (1994), 112–13. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, Harmondsworth, revised ed., 1985. Print.
- Spender, Stephen. "Politics and a Poet," In *the New Republic*, Vol. 190, No. 19, May 14, 1984. Print.
- Theodor, Adorno. *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Sherry Weber, Cambridge, MA,1981. Print.
- Whitaker, Steve. Poem of the Week: "Blood and Lead" By James Fenton.3rd May 2021,

Web.Oct.2024. <https://yorkshiretimes.co.uk/article/Poem-of-the-Week-Blood-and-Lead-by-James-Fenton>.

- Young, Robert. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West,* Routledge, London, 1990. Print.