

Michael Glover: Interview with Mark Doty

It was two years ago that I first read a book by a remarkable young American poet called Mark Doty. He was completely unknown in this country. His poems had a compassionate, lyrical urgency, a descriptive and metaphorical power that was more exciting than anything I'd read from America since the death of Robert Lowell in the 1970s.

Last month Doty came to Britain to lodge in a converted pigsty at the Arvon Foundation in Totleigh, Devon, and do what he regularly does at the University of Utah: teach poetry to aspiring poets. He is one of a species that is common in the United States, but rare and often regarded with some suspicion over here: the professional, tenured poet.

His schedule at Utah is relatively light he teaches two days a week from January to June. But the rest of his income comes from workshops and fees for his many poetry readings, as well as from grants and book royalties. In Devon, he says, it was "very intense". With 16 student poets, he "spent all day, every day, doing workshops and writing exercises, talking about poems, reading poems - theirs and mine."

Isn't it bad for poets to spend so much of their time thinking and talking about the art? Shouldn't they have some life outside poetry so that, when they return to it, they have something to write about?

"What's good is that I get to participate in a conversation about the art," he said, when we met at the Poetry Society in London's Covent Garden. He speaks in a gentle, insistent voice. "Of course, talking about poetry and writing it are two very different things, but there's something about that dialogue between teacher and student that is nurturing for me as a writer. I enjoy that kind of structured contact with other people and their stories, with their struggles to shape themselves on the page."

Reading poetry to audiences, he says, helps his writing. "I learn about new poems in the process of reading aloud. You listen differently when you're reading to an audience - it's as if part of you is in that audience listening to that new poem. You hear weaker lines, glitches, rhythmic problems, and that helps in the revision process. Of course, the real work of poetry happens when one reader is alone with one book because, when we read a poem by ourselves, we can stop and start, daydream about what we've just read, take time to examine. What you hear in a poetry reading is always the skin of a poem. You can't apprehend the depths and complexities of a good poem when it's simply read to you once."

He thinks of himself "as a literary writer with roots in a tradition that values complexity and a certain sort of thickness of language; a poetry I hope that can't be gotten in one hearing."

But why was poetry worth listening to anyway? Why was it so humanly valuable? "Poetry is a kind of distillation of individuality amidst a world where the unique, the one-off, is at some risk. Driving through Devon this morning, I was startled to come upon a branch of Staples, an American office supply chain, a store that you can walk into in almost any medium-sized city in the States. Let that stand for the universalisation and standardisation of so many kinds of

experience. Poetry is absolutely resistant to that . . ."

So poetry is a bulwark against consumerism? "It is in a way. Of course there is a tiny degree in which poetry can be commodified and sold, but it can also of course be endlessly xeroxed, published on the Internet, memorised and possessed by many people. And what is a poem but a sort of replica or model of an individual process of knowing, and since each of us knows a little bit differently, and each of us has that combination of voice and internal rhythm and ways of seeing which are capable of making something idiosyncratically and unmistakably ours, then the poem keeps putting the self into the forefront in a way which is profoundly valuable . . ."

Poetry, then, establishes a kind of world-wide community of interior lives? "That would be my hope, yes, that it continues to put interiority into the foreground. Also, happily, a poem can't just live in the interior. If it did it would be perhaps just a journal entry. It might just be solipsistic. Or purely private. The best poems, real poems, reach out to include readers, and so they model the process of interiority meeting the exterior, the self in a community. Hooray for that . . ."

Doty's voice sounds Southern - and that's where his forebears come from. His mother's family, Irish immigrants who left during the potato famine, settled in Sweet-water, Tennessee. "My great-grand-mother remembered riding in the back of a covered wagon from Georgia to Tennessee, fleeing Sherman's return march. They were dirt-poor millet farmers."

Doty's parents left the rural South at the beginning of the second world war. His father was an army engineer, so they moved from town to town, sometimes in the South, sometimes in the West, from one anonymous place to another. "I grew up with a sense that home was something one constructed or carried around inside. I grew up loving books because they were reliable company. You could take them with you . . ."

Aged 16, Doty met a poet, realised that "poetry might be a way to live" and enrolled at the University of Tucson, Arizona. He then dropped out, married at the age of 18, got into school teaching, graduated and took an intensive poetry course.

He didn't begin to accept that he was gay until 1981. He gave up on a bad and stultifying marriage and, with \$600 in his pocket, headed to Manhattan. "I got a job as a secretary," he says, "and began what seemed to me a real life because in my early twenties, like many gay men of my generation, I had been in flight from my sexuality. I had issues of identity to work out before I could begin to live a life that was founded in something more authentic . . ."

He had two poetry collections published. Then his life and work were dramatically changed by the discovery that his lover, Wally Roberts, was HIV-positive. Wally's subsequent decline, culminating in his death in 1994, transfigured Doty's art rather as the intimate and terrible experience of war transfigured Wilfred Owen's 80 years ago.

In two poetry collections - *My Alexandria* and *Atlantis* - and a prose memoir entitled *Heaven's Coast*, Aids became, in Doty's words, "the great intensifier", and the poetry itself an increasingly anguished and complicated negotiation with imminent death. During Wally's decline, the couple settled in Provincetown at the very tip of Cape Cod; in the poems that little town, with its salt marsh and shifting dunes, seems to embody the very idea of transience.

I asked Doty how his poetry - and his image of that coastal town (he still lives there for six

months of the year) - had changed since Wally's death. After the removal of the Damoclean sword, what next? "Well, the poems I have found myself writing over the last two years are much less about grief than they are about a passage back to participation in the world, about the renewal of that contract that we make with life to be a part of things. In some ways I think these new poems are more public because they are less involved with some desperate negotiation with mortality. I am turning my attention out to other things. I think they have some different sorts of colour to them, too, a different music, and a different harmonic character maybe . . ."

But did he see Provincetown differently now? "I've spent much less time there over the past two years. In part, that was because I wanted to clear the slate, to get away from its intensity and small-town character. It's a place that's so fraught with history for me - not only my life with Wally, but so many people I knew there have died in such a short period of time. In some ways I feel like I've lived there for decades even though I've in fact only lived there for about seven years.

"The character of the community's changing, too. When I first came there, it was very much a refuge for people who didn't expect to live long. Now, because of new drugs and the sort of strange new hopeful position of the epidemic, suddenly people aren't moving to Provincetown planning to die any more . . ."

When I asked him about his politics Doty replied with an uncharacteristic lack of assurance and fluency. He said that he had consistently voted Democrat but that, in his heart, he was something much closer to a libertarian. "The places where I've been most politically engaged have been with gay issues, but I think that the best use of my energies is not in organising but through writing . . ."

"That does not mean necessarily writing overtly political poetry, though. The reason for that is as follows. I've mostly written from the principle that I wanted to make a discovery in the course of writing a poem. If I knew what I thought or felt, I would be less likely to write because I depend upon the energy of uncovering what I think and feel about any subject. Which makes political poetry - overtly political poetry - particularly difficult."

What next? A new collection of poems is due out in America next spring; he plans to write a prose memoir on his earliest years in the autumn. "It's a story about childhood and the love of poetry," he told me. "I bet you didn't know I used to do interpretative dances to Stravinsky at the age of ten, Michael . . ."

No, I hadn't known, but I could easily have imagined it.

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