



# PHIL VERNON

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## About Phil Vernon

**Phil Vernon** returned to the UK in 2004, after two decades in various parts of Africa. He lives in Kent, and works as an advisor on peacebuilding and international development. He mostly writes formal poetry, finding the interaction with pre-established patterns of rhythm and rhyme can lead in surprising directions. His poems have appeared in numerous magazines, journals and websites, and been shortlisted in competitions. A micro-collection, *This Quieter Shore*, was published by Hedgehog Poetry Press in 2018. His poetry website is [www.philvernon.net/category/poetry](http://www.philvernon.net/category/poetry).

## The Monday Writer Interview:

### Phil Vernon

in conversation with Nnorom Azuonye

**You have an MSc in Environmental Forestry. Forgive my ignorance in this area, but is there any part of forestry that has nothing to do with the human environment?**

Forestry like most disciplines covers a wide variety of perspectives and specialities. Foresters see forests, woodlands and trees as beautiful and inspiring aesthetically, but also a resource on which we will always depend, not just for the things we need to live well, but home for an amazing variety of life, and the lungs of the planet. So, something to protect and enjoy.



**You have devoted most of your life to development, humanitarian and peacebuilding work. How did you get into that line of work?**

Really by accident. After qualifying as a forester I worked as a volunteer in Sudan, helping replant trees in areas that had earlier been completely cleared for large scale agriculture. It kind of snowballed from there, and I followed work opportunities in a number of African countries as they arose, working for charities. I soon became far more interested in how people use their land, than in how trees themselves grow – and actually stopped working specifically in forestry after a few years.

**What peacebuilding initiatives were you involved with in these African countries; Sudan, Lesotho, Rwanda, Mali, Ghana and Uganda? Tell me about the African people and the governments you encountered and their attitudes to Peacebuilding and conflict resolution.**

I've been involved in a number of initiatives in various countries. Peacebuilding is something that requires a collective effort, and I doubt my personal contributions have been particularly critical. I've been privileged to work with people whose contributions were. One initiative I remember distinctly was when a group of Ugandan and international organisations got together to lobby the government and donors there to change their approach towards a long-running civil war in Northern Uganda. Working together, I like to think we convinced some important decision makers to adopt a less confrontational approach. That helped reduce some of the tensions underpinning that war. I was present one day when a Ugandan

colleague spoke so eloquently about the need for a change of government approach that he convinced one of the most senior politicians to change his mind.

But a lot of the work I've been involved in has been at a community level – supporting local efforts to break through tensions and conflicts between different ethnic groups for example, and live together peacefully side by side. It can take great courage for local women and men to take a stand for peace, and it's fantastic to see progress being made – often, despite the behaviours of their political leaders.

### **What do you think is the biggest threat to world peace today and what can each of us do to contribute to it?**

Peace is possible when people are treated fairly: by their neighbours, by their governments, by businesses – and even by people far away. Unfairness creates grievances, and grievances are ultimately the basis of conflict and violence. We need to look at our world, both locally and geopolitically, through a lens of fairness – and act accordingly. This applies equally to relationships between individuals, communities and nations.

Peace is not out of our reach. We can each contribute by seeking to increase the sum of fairness within our own sphere of influence or control: how we treat others, how we vote, what we spend our money on, and so on.

We also need to call on our leaders to redouble their efforts to reduce unfairness globally. Climate change may not immediately seem like it's connected to peace. But imagine what will happen if sea levels rise in a country far away, and people living on the coast have to move inland in search of a new place to live, or land to farm. This creates conflicts with the people already living inland... So even fixing things like climate change has a peacebuilding dimension.

### **When and why did you start writing poetry?**

I started at school – I had a poem or two in the school magazine. But I didn't continue with it. I wrote poems again for a short period in my late twenties – when I was living in a village in Sudan, and then later in Lesotho. But I stopped when I married and had children. Then I started writing again in 2012, at the age of 55.

The first poem I wrote in this later period was a sonnet. I wrote it on a long plane journey from Tajikistan back to the UK. It was pretty bad – not something I would ever publish! – but I really enjoyed the experience of trying to craft a poem out of the connection between an emotion and an idea. And especially, trying to fit it all into the kind of jigsaw puzzle of the sonnet form, without undermining either the emotion or the idea.

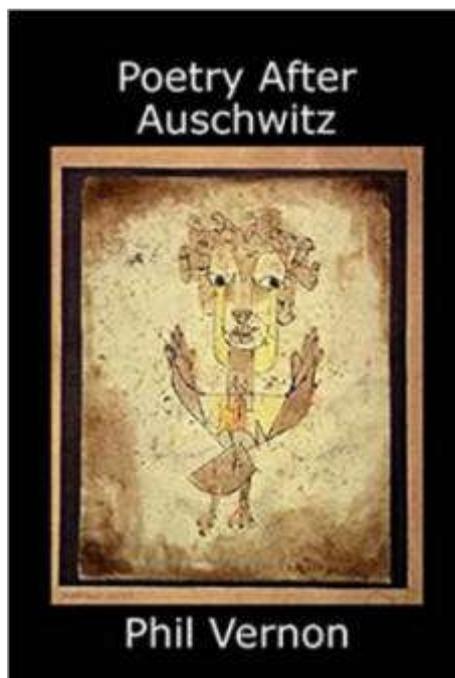
I was a commuter in those days, and my daily train journey provided a great opportunity to write. Poetry caught on, and nowadays if I don't have a poem or two on the go, I feel a little bereft.

I still use sonnets and other 'formal' forms a lot of the time. I really like the way the need to find a rhyme, or stick to the metre leads me in sometimes surprising directions that unlock hidden emotions or insights.

**You are a member of the Kent and Sussex Poetry Society. In what ways do you think that belonging to a group like this can help develop your poetry?**

Joining the Kent & Sussex Poetry Society was critical for me. We're a local group, but we invite well-known poets to read their work to us once a month, and that's given me exposure to poets I wouldn't otherwise have known about.

We also hold informal workshops once a month, where we offer critical suggestions on one another's work. That's been absolutely amazing: it's done in a friendly and generous but nevertheless honest way. And the society has quite a few members with a strong publishing track record, so it's been inspirational to learn from them – as well from other members who may not be too worried about getting published, but are nevertheless really talented. Writing poetry can be a somewhat solitary pursuit, and it's not always easy to 'hear' how your own work might be heard and understood by others. So, having a sounding board is amazing. And anyway, companionship and solidarity among poets is essential.



**Your new book, *Poetry After Auschwitz*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize winner in the Sentinel Poetry Book Competition 2018, was published by SPM publications in 2020. The very word 'Auschwitz' stirs horrible emotions in people due to associative reflections on atrocities carried out there by the Nazi butchers. How much of this collection actually has anything to do with Auschwitz, or is it used as a metaphor for ongoing atrocities in the world?**

The title poem is a reference to a quote from the cultural critic and philosopher Theodor Adorno, that 'writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Writing at the end of the Second World War, he was questioning the legitimacy

of art and culture: how could a European culture that had produced such

exquisite beauty, from Durer and Bach, to Richard Strauss, also have produced the genocide, if the two were unconnected? In the same essay, he also says 'all culture shares the guilt of society'.

I thought long and hard about his ideas, and eventually wrote a short poem with the title *Poetry After Auschwitz*. I had always thought poetry should aspire to being beautiful, affective and carry some cognitive content too. In writing that poem, I was asking myself: is it OK to write beautiful – even lyrical – poetry even when it touches on the most barbaric aspects of human behaviour?

In the end, I decided it was. But to answer your question directly, the images in that particular poem are intended to suggest the central European landscape in which so many Jews and others were murdered by the Nazis, and indistinct memories of those they killed. The poem suggests that I am not claiming to speak to them or for them – but that if my poetry remains aware of them, and what happened to them, it can tentatively look beyond... and is perhaps therefore not as barbaric as Adorno proposed.

Of course, many of the other poems also touch on conflict and other ways people have hurt, and continue to hurt other people and peoples. In the end, as one of the poems claims: 'all violence is intimate' – which perhaps brings us back to Adorno's notion.

**There is a lot of pain, hurt and loss in *Poetry After Auschwitz*. Reading this book in a time of Covid-related losses and anxiety makes one stop and ask 'what can I give to make the world a better place?' Was it your intention to write a book that could be so potentially transformative of the human condition?**

Not at all. The poems represent an exploration of what I personally feel and have felt about these issues. Some people say that a good poem resides in the specific, but resonates in a more general way, or has resonance for readers based on their experiences. If so, great!

But also, not all the poems in the book are about heavy subjects. It also contains love poems – and one of my personal favourites is *Winter Gardens*, which seems to be about reconciliation.

**Ah, the love poems and poems about nature in *Poetry After Auschwitz* will always ambush readers of the book. By the way, did you intend them to reduce the sustained heaviness of your subjects, or is it just the way things are – there will always be love and beauty even where hatred and ugliness abound?**

Each poem was written as a stand-alone piece. But I did try to assemble the collection in a way that breaks the 'heaviness' with lighter work – and

to communicate the tapestry of human emotions and experiences. One thing I learned from working with Ethiopian refugees in Sudan 35 years ago was that despite the challenges life throws at us, human society is infinitely creative and – despite the negatives – people are usually good to others. There’s a wide and deep wellspring of emotional intelligence in society, if we can but tap it more readily.

**Is there anything you’d like people to know before they read *Poetry After Auschwitz* that the blurbs don’t touch?**

As I said, my ambition for each poem is that it’s aesthetically and emotionally effective, and says something on a more intellectual level too. I hope that’s been realised in at least some of the poems. Most if not all of the poems are intended to be read on several levels, so I hope people will read them in a way that allows each one to reveal these.

I’d also like to thank Noel Williams, the competition judge, for selecting the book. It gave me such a boost personally to know someone independent liked the work. And I’d also like to thank SPM publications for producing such a beautifully printed edition.

**Thank you very much for your time, Phil. We will certainly have more conversations in the future, especially as [Poetry After Auschwitz](#) continues to make its way on our watch.**

Thank you too, and it’s been a pleasure to get to know you Nnorom. [SLQ](#)

“The Monday Writer Interview: Phil Vernon in Conversation with Nnorom Azuonye” ©2020 Nnorom Azuonye & Phil Vernon.

Nnorom Azuonye is the author of *Funeral of the Minstrel* (a play), *The Bridge Selection: Poems for the Road, Letter to God & Other Poems* and *On the Record: Conversations with Writers & Artists* (12 July 2021, SPM Publications)

## Poetry after Auschwitz

*'Poetry is pointless – like kicking a stone'  
- overheard at a poetry reading*

At the start and the end of this long, straight road:  
a silent child, a house in flames,  
a leafless tree, an empty town

He kicks a stone to watch it leap  
and skitter on the flattened clay,  
then slow and stall and go to ground

Along the forest edge stand those  
he's failed to save, he sings his song;  
his unknown patrons hear no sound

and yet he feels their silence deep  
beneath his feet, and sees beyond  
the tree, the child, the house, the town

## El Tres de Mayo

The edge of town. A lantern lights the man  
about to die. His comrades clasp their eyes.  
He kneels: arms spread like sails aloft, he wills  
defiance but it's terror which obtains.

The friar murmurs blessings, swears and damns  
the French. The waiting chorus moans and cries,  
then 'tirez!', muskets fusillade; he spills  
beside the corpses slumped among the stains.

Low fearful wails behind the victims' hands,  
the panicked mumbling of the priest who shrives  
the doomed, the terse command, the gunshots – still  
they resonate, among the faint remains

of ancient susurrus of surf on sand,  
dead families' and lovers' truths and lies,  
muezzin, birdsong, rain on roof tiles, peals  
of laughter, angelus and lonesome trains.

Each wave, since noise and atmosphere began,  
continuously pales but never dies:  
each instant as it passes, pares and steals  
a half, and then a half, and half again...

reducing history from the first big bang  
towards a point it will not realise:  
attenuated, yet its core prevails,  
diminishing, but nowhere vanishing.

What's past is present: faded cryptogram  
of sound – no matter if we try to prise  
a meaning out of or ignore it – fills  
our ears with its abiding, quiet refrain:

the edge of town. A lantern lights the man  
about to die. His comrades clasp their eyes.  
He kneels, arms spread like sails aloft, he wills  
defiance but it's terror which obtains.

## The pallbearer

The bell falls quiet; the horses' shoes collide  
with cobbles; music floats; the priest appears.  
We measure off our height in equal pairs,  
absorb the coffin's weight and, eyes downcast,  
in tentative half-march, proceed inside.

June's brightness filters limpid through stained glass  
into a cool obscurity. Song climbs  
from choir to fill the space, and all combines  
in Dean Donne's Equal Music, Equal Light,  
to ease us, leaving but two questions at the last.

What makes a well-lived life good, in our sight?  
The mourners praise her as a wife, her art,  
the way she raised her children, her kind heart.  
Was that enough, how do we set the bar?  
Had she done more, might they still more delight?

And what is left of us, when what we are  
dissolves? A pigeon perches in the beams  
and causes quite a stir, her soul it seems,  
ascending – mumbo jumbo, surely: wings  
as apt to rouse, as raise her to a star.

The vicar sprinkles holy water, sings  
the final phrases as his curate swings  
the censer, then we shoulder her again.  
I'd swear she's lighter now than when we came –  
not by the weight of her departed flame –  
but since to pray together strengthens us within.