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**Also by Christopher Middleton:**

**Poetry:**

*Torse 3* (1962)  
*Nonsequences* (1965)  
*Our Flowers & Nice Bones* (1969)  
*The Lonely Suppers of W.V. Balloon* (1975)  
*Carminalenia* (1980)  
*111 Poems* (1983)  
*Two Horse Wagon Going By* (1986)  
*Selected Writings* (1989)  
*The Balcony Tree* (1992)  
*Intimate Chronicles* (1996)  
*The Word Pavilion and Selected Poems* (2001)  
*Of the Mortal Fire* (2003)

**Prose:**

*Pataxanadu and Other Prose* (1977)  
*Serpentine* (1985)  
*In the Mirror of the Eighth King* (1998)  
*Crypto-Topographia* (2002)

**Essays:**

*'Bolshevism in Art' and Other Expository Writings* (1977)  
*The Pursuit of the Kingfisher* (1983)  
*Jackdaw Jiving: Selected Essays on Poetry & Translation* (1998)

**Editor and/or translator (selected):**

*Modern German Poetry, 1910-1960* (with Michael Hamburger) (1962)  
*Goethe: Selected Poems* (1983; 2nd edition, 1996)  
*Robert Walser: Selected Stories* (1983)  
*Lars Gustafsson: The Stillness of the World Before Bach. New Selected Poems* (1988)  
*Andalusian Poems* (with Leticia Garza-Falcón) (1992)

**Also by Marius Kociejowski:**

**Poetry:**

*Doctor Honoris Causa* (1993)  
*Music's Bride* (1999)

**Prose:**

*The Street Philosopher and The Holy Fool: A Syrian Journey* (2004)

# Palavers

*Christopher Middleton in Conversation  
with Marius Kociejowski*

and

*A Nocturnal Journal*  
by  
**Christopher Middleton**

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Rear cover photograph of Christopher Middleton in 1995,  
at Imbat, in the Troad, by Güney Dal.

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## **CM: A Portrait**



I was in bed when Christopher Middleton first entered my life. I had been sequestered there for almost a month with a refractory spine. The drugs I took, pure codeine at one point, were such that I wept through the whole of World Championship Darts, so moved I was by those Apollonic figures, a band of ogres really, on the flickering television screen, and also by those sacrificial helpings of chips, sausages and baked beans that the audience consumed at their beer-towered tables. It was an aspect of English life that had completely bypassed me. The doctor, finding me in this blissful state, instantly put me on a duller regime. I was forced back to poetry. My literary life, insofar as I was able to pursue one, for my eyes swam all over the page, comprised a small pile of Middleton's books on the floor beside me. It was, in truth, my earliest acquaintance with his work, in particular the handsome 1969 Fulcrum Press edition of *Our Flowers & Nice Bones*. (Oh my, he's got a brain for titles.) I do not wish to give the wrong impression here, for Middleton is primarily a man of words, of words exquisitely bound together, but in my drugged state I was peculiarly receptive to his poem 'Birth of Venus', which reads in full:

V V V V V V V  
 V V V V V V  
 V V V V  
 V V  
 V V  
 V

Could I really have been pondering the absence of that single V, finding in this something at once symbolic and full of erotic promise, when my wife came in and dropped in front of me a letter postmarked Austin, Texas? I looked at the sender's name and address and then I glanced at the volume beside me. This, surely, was proof enough that I'd reached a purely hallucinogenic stage of my existence.

I do not wish to beat on about the zeitgeist or the want of one or about how whatever it is we're slumming our way through now is notable for its absence of generosity, especially in literary matters, but

here, giving me succour when it was most needed, was a letter from a stranger full of kind words about a poem of mine he had read in a magazine. The impression this made upon me, especially in my physical state, was incalculable. One should not make too much of a man's age but it is rare to find poets of Middleton's years and stature giving unsolicited encouragement to poets younger than themselves. I think this also has to do with Middleton's own youthfulness, which, in his work, is characterised by restlessness for and a desire to stake out new territories. Age does not deter him — juvenescence excites. Could he be one of the few to have properly understood Pound's injunction: make it new? I believe so, for what he writes is a matter of what he requires; it is born of necessity: there is no concession to prevailing modes. The letter marked the beginning of a friendship whose rewards, for me, have been immeasurable. A few months later, in the summer of 1992, Middleton came to England and to supper at our place. I shall record these first impressions of the physical man because, to some degree, they mark the interior one as well. There is a curious manner to how he walks, almost as if he were wearing bedroom slippers, a sort of floating aspect to him, and, quite frankly, the impression he made was one of a rather cool dude. A medallion hung from around his neck and the belt buckle he wore was as large as a horseshoe. Well, I might dissemble a little. If the man who soft-shoed into our lives was a Texan of one's imagination rather than of the real world the manner and voice were English in a way most English people no longer remember how to be. I have never had the opportunity to observe him in his adopted milieu, of course, so perhaps I am mistaken. It may be that he orders his glass of milk with a drawl and that tumbleweed does indeed tumble through the streets of Austin. What a strange and equally not so strange place for him to be.

I am sorry to dwell at such length upon a man's attire and how it conceals the man inside but I think there is some aspect of this in the writing, the precise English that comes of a fine education, such as this country offered once upon a time, dressed up in some fairly exotic clothes. If the ability to speak in perfectly constructed paragraphs, with an audible carriage return in the voice, is one of his many gifts I do not wish to give an impression of him being an academic. Although he was for some decades attached to academe the experience has never, in the way it so often does, starved the poetic voice. Wisely, perhaps, he

has steered clear of teaching English literature. The immense intellect comes always with a twinkle. Middleton is the only person I know who can get up in the morning, light up a cigarette at the breakfast table, and say “I had an interesting dream last night” and instantly have his listener enthralled. I can never think of him coming to any subject other than from a unique angle. Indeed, to be in his company is to partake of an alternative view of the world and by this I do not mean one that is flaky or Daliesque or manufactured but one that is deeply scrutinized. The poetic vision is likewise. If any of this makes him a hugely difficult poet to place, and the tendency has been to dump him somewhere in the middle of continental Europe, where he can do the least damage, I would argue for a species of Englishness constantly at war with itself.

And I wanted not that Englishness;  
I wanted deliverance from you so soon,

From the sticky stuff you weltered in,  
Leaf, branch, and bole in your shade they dispensed

The glue, the fragrant glue, but your blossoms,  
Lady, they did provide the pleasure of tea.

*from ‘The Lime Tree’*

The fact he is a polymath does not undermine my case, for the best and the most English poetry, from Chaucer on, is that which has fully absorbed foreign influence. In Middleton’s case, of course, one must add big American skies and perhaps it would not be too fanciful to append Turkish ones as well, beneath which he has spent many a season. Could it be he goes there in order to divest himself of both Old and New World stodge? There is something most liberated and liberating in those poems of the Ottoman landscape. I think too the ‘American’ voice contains within it much from south of the Rio Grande. As I’ve said already, his essential Englishness puts on some fancy clothes.

I’m not sure if the critical language that might bottle the essence of Middleton’s prosody is or will ever be there. This is not to discourage any

attempt to do so nor is it to denigrate those already made but merely to say that the work is, in both the poetry and the prose, mercurial and not easily captured. I have rarely known a mind to move at such speed and yet hold in such tight rein the forms its speculations take. There is so much going on in any one poem of his, a word may be so heavily freighted with meaning, for instance, that at times, I believe, he is disappointed by the failure of others to grasp a particular point. On occasion I have tried to tiptoe past him but always he catches me. Against such public indifference and private reluctance he poses a serious challenge. Historically, I believe, he has his precedents — Beddoes, for example — figures who loom hugely at the sidelines.

I have noticed that with many writers there is an adjective they will frequently use, a verbal tic even, both in their speech and in their prose, that points, probably unwittingly, to some dimension of their own work. With Geoffrey Hill, for example, it is *exemplary*; with W. S. Graham it is *wow wow*; and with Middleton it is *abstruse*. It is important here to note that the dictionary defines the word as not only 'hard to understand' but also 'profound'. This is precisely where Middleton diverges from so much poetry being written, in which despite its claims to newness the seemingly abstruse is merely obtuse. With Middleton, on the other hand, one's efforts to understand are hugely rewarded. One's comprehension of any poem of his is never complete, for in the best of them, which, for me, are often the most apparently direct ones, such as 'Dead Button' and 'The Old Tour Guide—His Interpreter', poems that one thinks one has got a handle on, there is, ultimately, something in them quite unfathomable. All I can say is thank goodness, well done. It means, too, that the poems one keeps revisiting are never quite the same as they were the day before. They take off and they put on clothes. I shall return to the poetry and allow a moment's pause in which to consider other aspects of his literary activities.

The essays collected in *Jackdaw Jiving* are, many of them, the finest in existence. There is in each of them the sense not only of an object being scrutinised but also of our being able, at the same time, to observe a mind at work, at the very moment of its discoveries. What we get in effect is a double unfolding. And just when one fears a nod towards academe, suddenly the direction of the argument changes and the reader is swept to a place where he could never have expected to be.



Adorn this hand of mine  
now with a falcon.

With a falcon honor me, one  
with shiny wings, feathers  
Ruffled by the wind, Proudly,  
hand at play with the wind,  
I will launch it at sunrise, capture  
the free with my captive.

‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn al-Qabturnuh

Which, among many valuable lessons, is the most important he has ever given me? I struggle to remember the exact words he used, which had to do with what it is to *actualise* in the making of a poem, to make a word work in the poem as it would in real life. I will focus on ‘Gelibolu’ not only because my wife and I are its proud dedicatees but also because he wrote part of and indeed completed the poem at our house.

For the seven minutes it will take, at most,  
To slant these figures over their borderlines,  
Surprise yourself: Be the lanky waiter  
Waving his tray in Çanakkale.

Along the Promenade

People dawdle, arm in arm. He feels a cooling,  
Feels in the air a cooling, and he knows—  
A multitude of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews,  
How they felt it ninety years ago.

Would it be overly insensitive of me if I were to inform the reader, in case he doesn’t already know, that Gelibolu is the Turkish equivalent for Gallipoli? Middleton is not about to give us too much of a helping hand over the top, although the clues are there. ‘Slant these figures’, he writes, and here the words themselves, as transformed in the brain, assume the profile of soldiers marching up a slope. We remember that silhouette from somewhere, perhaps from the cover of a paperback novel about



Have no possible interest, constructed there  
Some distance from the graves,  
A more or less decent distance from the graves.

Is there not something quietly devastating in that ‘more or less’, when, almost a century away from the exactitudes that huge tragedy demands of us, we are numbed into the approximate? Day by day, I watched as Middleton struggled for the right words, the ones that would ‘actualise’. The jangle of the oud—we did argue over that word and the many that stood in its place—is not exactly right except where it most matters, in the imagination’s ear.

What the hell, though, why come all this distance if not to divaricate a little? The man’s a friend, after all, and not a literary exercise. The poems speak for themselves, are there for anyone wanting to surprise himself before Christmas comes. A sense of worth, though, demands coinage. Silver’s the path I’ll take, gold my excuse. We were eating fishcakes in Cambridge. Yes, those and cricket are two elements of England he is not prepared to waive. We had just attended a poetry conference that afternoon and later that evening he was to give a reading of his own work, which would include ‘La Morena’, ‘the dark one’, the poem in which a white and rather voluptuous cow figures.

She will eat dry bread if there’s none better  
My white cow who tastes always of oranges

My white cow who goes one better than the snow  
Her quim is heaven for whom she pleases

A celebration of female sexuality it may be, but it was not so, or perhaps it was too much so, for a small band of feminists one of whom later fought back with a white cow poem of her own. I quite like the lady who wrote and subsequently published the piece but I think, sadly, she failed to grab the subject by the horns. Anyway, back to the fishcakes—I had had my fill of the afternoon session and Middleton who must have registered my struggle for oxygen pulled from his pocket a coin, which he held like a talisman between his fingers.

“What do you make of this?” he asked.

Since childhood he has been collecting coins and it was here, in a Cambridge market, a few years before the war, that he purchased his first coin. A passion for numismatics, Roman in particular, has followed him all through life.

“It’s from Antioch,” he continued. “Whoever minted this coin may not have spoken the language. If you look here, you’ll see he made a spelling mistake.”

I collected stamps once, and remembering how the old, immaculately engraved ones were like small windows opening onto strange worlds, I was able to observe, as though my old enthusiasm were being mirrored back at me, the wonder in his eyes. Now, wonderment surely is the most contagious of all mental states and Middleton is, as anyone who has ever been in his company for a while can testify, a lethal carrier. Soon after, inspired by his example, I began to read everything I could find about Antioch, ‘the fair crown of the Orient’ (*Orientis apicem pulcrum*), whose streets were positioned at such an angle that they would catch the breeze blowing off the Orontes. What a thing for a whole city to be a poetic device. A year later, when I was about to make my second journey to Syria, in order to complete a book of my travels there, I decided I’d go via Antakya, the greyly modern Turkish equivalent of Antioch. I was, perhaps, canvassing for an ancient breeze. Shortly before I left Middleton presented me with a third-century bronze coin from there. A superb piece, it bears the finely engraved image of the emperor Diocletian, whose bullish profile, he told me, would befit a captain of the Bulgarian football team. On the reverse side is Tyche, the goddess of good fortune, who presided over the city, whose benign presence, however, could not save the place from eventual destruction by earthquakes and Mongol hordes. The coin travelled with me. I showed it to Padre Domenico in his parish in Antakya. “Ah,” he mused, “very fine! Very fine!” I think dazzled by the metal he temporarily put into the shade any memory of Diocletian who was, after all, extremely brutal towards his Christian antecedents.

Some months later, I came across an obscure mid-nineteenth century account of Antioch in which its author, F. A. Neale, describes floods that come down the mountains with such force ‘stones that ten men could barely move, have been rolled past my door, with a booming sound like thunder.’ Also, many antiquities were disinterred, including

‘an incalculable number of valuable coins’, the majority of which were swept into the Orontes. Afterwards, children with sieves, sticks and brooms would go through the gutters, looking for coins and ancient jewels left behind in the mud. What they found they sold for a pittance to a Turkish dealer in antiquities called Hadji Ali who in turn sold them to English travellers at an immense profit. So avaricious Hadji had become it was only a matter of time before he himself would become unstuck. Now, Hadji possessed a magnificent emerald ‘which presented the striking device of seven distinct heads, on being turned in as many directions’ and which he refused to sell on account of its great value. A visiting Turkish official wanting to deprive Hadji of this treasure, most flauntingly NOT FOR SALE, had him accused of dealing in antiquities without a government licence. Hadji was deprived of his emerald, given the bastinado and sentenced to several months in prison. When released he had to start up his business again from scratch, presumably giving the children even less than before for their finds. I fancy my coin which must have passed through many hands, Christian and Muslim and pagan, later passed through Hadji’s and then, over a hundred years later, through Middleton’s as well and finally, finally into mine.