ACTS OF MIND II

Interviews by Richard Jackson

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FACT, EXPERIENCE, RELEASE

An Interview with Sharon Olds, 1986

PM: What do you think is the relation between truth and fact in poetry and in everyday life? Some poets and critics subscribe to the notion that no facts are really relevant, that you just go with the flow of language wherever that leads you. Some see a dramatic and dialectic relationship. For a lot of critics, only poetry that subscribes to a certain mindset or dogma is true, but poetry that is "rhapsodic," as one critic describes poetry that emphasizes verbal play, is not serious for them. These critics often seem to be against exploration and provisional discovery and for stasis, for absolute values, sometimes absolute forms, a perverted formalism. Of course, all these categories are oversimplifications anyways, but I know your poems contain many historical and factual references, like "Photograph of the Girl," so perhaps this would be a way to begin.

SO: Well, poems contain facts. "Photograph of the Girl" contains facts. There's the fact of her age, that she's going to die, that there is a famine, the fact of puberty. I think facts are important, and trying to state truths, too. I feel secure with the poems of Phil Levine because of that. I have a poem about a guy who almost jumped off the roof across the way. Perhaps, according to the view of those critics, there are not facts there, but to me it's all facts. And there are always moral judgments in the language, as in the poem by Stanley Plumly you were talking about before we started where there's that line about the father "sawing on my sister with a whip."

When I first saw the man on the roof I didn't know whether he was in danger or dangerous—I got my kids out of the rooms that faced that way. I didn't know the facts of the welfare hotel across the street where he was, or the facts of his life. But I saw lots of facts. Certainly there's a danger for poetry in using "I" and "my." It was self-indulgent to watch the whole thing, but it was also self-realizing.

Look, I don't think you're in total control of what's going to come out of you as a writer. I think the best you can do is bring out, in the best way you can, the best of what's in you. Everybody's voice is different, everyone's style. You have to have some trust in what's inside you, some faith in the value of what you say to others.

PM: Do you have a sense of a voice or group of voices of your own? Or a sense of who the voice is addressing?

SO: Voice is something I'm really not aware of. I'm aware of wanting people without much education to be able to understand what I say. So I suppose I am for a simple voice. Addressing someone? I often wonder about that. Who do I think is there? When I'm writing I'm not really addressing anyone in a way. I suppose it's that imaginary friend that kids have when they're alone in their rooms and they talk to someone. For me, the biggest factor is the experience itself, more powerful than anything I could put on paper. And then the process of writing, how to begin, where to go, and all the time I'm not thinking it up; it's just coming it. Imagination comes so much from the unconscious; it's a gift.

PM: Does consciousness enter very much into this? I mean, is the process quick, with few drafts?

SO: Well, most of the poems that I like enough to get out into the world don't go through many drafts, as many people's poems do. If I don't get it right the first time, it just never can be fixed. So the kind of impulse of the first draft is sort of it. When I see I'm falling into a bad habit, then my consciousness will be more vigilant. While I'm writing, I might see a third adjective in one line and say, "Okay, now come on." I have to give myself to the impulse, but keep a balance between control and non-control.

PM: A lot of the poems deal with death, of course, and yet there often seems to be another kind of balance in them that saves them from utter pessimism. One of the things that perhaps characterizes your imagination is an impulse towards transformation. That provides many of the leaps in the poems, too. In "The Love Object" in *Satan Says* you have the line, "We are all students of the object, watching that moment / the person becomes the thing. And in "Ecstasy" in *The Dead and the Living* the lovers are transformed at the end, move out beyond the world. It seems to me that this metamorphic impulse overrides the pessimism generally in the books.
SO: Well, it does. The transformations just show how little we're in control, how one thing develops from another. I like your idea that transformation and metamorphosis have an optimism to them. I like the idea of taking leaps; it suggests that there's not a plan, that the poems are open. If I planned the ending, I would be dead as a poet. So much of what I do is balancing of all kinds: of death and life, loss and gaining of energy, fruitfulness and bareness. That's a way of getting beyond just yourself and towards something larger. A lot of poems have grief in them. "Photograph of the Girl" ends sadly for me because it suggests the possibilities, what could have been. I love Muriel Rukeyser for her ability to speak to others in situations like that.

PM: Many of your poems refer to larger contexts in their images—history, images from geology, biology. And a lot of them work by what might be called conceits; there's one basis of comparison that is followed through the poem—as when your sister's coming into your room is compared to the German Army, or "The Love Object."

SO: I had to take biology several times to pass it at Stanford, but I grew to love that stuff. The conceit structure sounds right, but it's not conscious. I suppose there's a play between the experience or the object and my sort of pathfinding through it. You can look at something and locate the emotional power in a lot of different places. It seems I'm most comfortable in locating the power in the object, in the experience, and seeing myself in some spatial or physical sense. Objects have a lot of power for me.

PM: Some of your poems express a need to go beyond language, as in "reading You." There's an emphasis on naming, the need to name things—objects, emotions around them, whatever.

SO: I don't really have strong feelings about the inadequacy of language to do what it's supposed to do. I wish myown vocabulary were better. I love those wonderful studies by Josephine Miles about the use of language in different centuries. I think the language in my second book is more varied; there are fewer repetitions of key words. I wanted more language, more freedom. I wanted not to be stuck in the sentence, too. In the last year, there's often one place in each poem where the grammar isn't strict. I wish I could do more of that.

PM: Do you think any other artforms have influenced your work, added that extra-linguistic sense?

SO: The artform I'm closest to after poetry is dance. Breath is a component of dance, and some kind of sincerity of the self where you've got the body you're given, which is all you have to work with. I've often found that when I dance, memories have been released in me—things I have never remembered before. When you said "form," I thought first of "release," then I thought of being true to oneself. I don't think of confinement or traditional form.

PM: The structures of your books have been very careful. Even just looking at the headings of the sections suggest almost an outline of concerns and subjects, almost as in an essay.

SO: When I wrote *Satan Says*, I didn't write a book—just a group of poems. When I work, I can't see beyond a poem I'm working on at the moment. When I put the book together, my obsessions were so obvious that I had to clear groupings. So when I first put it together, I just took one from each pile in a sequence so it would look like a book of

poems with more freedom. Then I realized that wouldn't work, and I had to admit what was there. The second book was originally going to be two books—poems for the dead and poems for the living. I had lots and lots of other poems that were going to be included. I realized these were to halves of one book. Now, as I am putting together a third book, I don't feel the need to organize so tightly by sections; it will be more open. A lot of the newer poems have to do with New York City, with World War II, with family, with El Salvador—there are lots of possibilities for organizing. I'm still in the middle of putting it together.

CROSSING OVER

An Interview with Charles Wright, 1986

PM: In his *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard talks about the relationship between objects and what they bring to him in terms of memory associations, fanciful meanings, notions about other times and places. For him, there is always something beyond the physical, tactile world; there's another dimension to existence that this world suggests. I think there's something of this notion in your own poems. For instance, in "Lonesome Pine Special," you have the lines—"In the world of dirt, each tactile thing / repeats the untouchable / In its own way, and in its own time." And in "The Other Side of the River," you say—"Something infinite behind everything appears, / and then disappears." And there's an emphasis on language itself. "Italian Days" asks—"What new episiotomy of the word?" Language itself becomes a thing, and what is "At the end of the last word." Language becomes something tactile and also something that slips through your hands.

CW: That's what it is. I know Bachelard's book, and it's interesting that there are such parallels. These are things I think about constantly and actually believe in firmly. The seen is always the doorway to the unseen, and in a way, language is the corridor to the unseen; it is a construct, and the only thing you have to imagine is the unseen. So language is the medium as well as the message, but you can't take that so far as to say that language is the content, in a self-reflexive way. It is the only way of getting the tactile into poems, and then of getting through what's tactile and what isn't. Language is just as real as what's tactile and tangible. I think one of the problems with some contemporary poetry is that some poets tend not to care about language; they thing what's real is all there is. So many poems are full of sentiment, chunky little blocks of writing that aren't even language in the sense that I have been describing. Poems aren't telegrams; they are workings out in language of the passage from the seen to the unseen. Of course, I'm just telling you the kind of poem I like to write.

PM: I was thinking of Blake as you spoke—his idea of the "fourfold vision," how limiting "single vision" is (seeing only the physical). I know there are a couple of references, at least implicitly, to him in your work. Has he been an influence?

CW: Not so much an influence but certainly someone I read after I had started writing and after I had found what interested me about language. I started to read people who were examples of that—and Blake was certainly one of them. I was not an English major in college, and I had lots of gaps to fill anyway.

PM: Related to this notion of the unseen is a notion of silences. Just a cursory look at your books suggest the ways in which white spaces and silences figure more in the more expansive rhythms you have developed. And silence itself becomes a central concern as a subject.

CW: Silence is language, the ultimate language, I suppose. The more I work with language the more I believe in the old truism, that silence speaks louder than words. You can fill more space with silence than you can with language, actually, and so I try to get some breathing space, some quiet, in the middle of the poem. I used to be so phonetic in my poems, and tried to wind them down to such tightness, and condensation. I still try to do that, but I like to spread it out more, have the lines condense rather than the whole poem, to have the poem tight in structure but loose in organization—if such a thing is possible.

PM: The tightness of the lines is what holds the larger movement together—sound patterns, repetitions, parallelisms.

CW: I am very interested in structure, and have been for several years. What I am interested in is the architecture of the poem, the landscape of the word itself—in other words, the landscape of the language, how the architecture of the poem carries or doesn't carry the language.

PM: In "Lost Bodies," there's an interesting architecture. You mention the scene around the Torri del Benaco, then the scene around Kingsport in the first two sections. The rest of the poem counterpoints these two in a sort of chiasmis pattern. "California Dreaming" does a similar thing.

CW: It is a shuttling, almost as if it were a bobbin trying to weave a pattern. What is interesting to me about "Lost Bodies" is that the structure is a paradigm for the whole of *The Other Side of the River*. There's a shuttling back and forth between East Tennessee and Italy, and that opening poem is the one that connects them, announces their interplay for the rest of the book.

PM: That's a larger version of the kind of parallelism and crossing over we were discussing just before. I guess any sense of form has this—a kind of symmetry, echoing, reflecting. But it's not just spatial; there's a temporal aspect, because the architecture allows a process of thinking and moving through time to occur—a dialectic. It's the process that seems finally important. The last few books, in fact, are always counterpointing memory and forgetfulness, different times. And an earlier poem suggests that we are, in effect, clocks. Time, too, has an otherness—not just the clock time but an inner time. You have another line: "the sky tilts toward the absolute."

CW: If you're really interested in structure, it seems to me that structure is infinite. Form is finite, though, and so what you try to do is work formally, in a finite situation, within an infinite arena—which is to say that you can keep building your poems expansively, but that the formal aspect has to be finite, limiting. It has to be tight. That's what I meant earlier when I said that I have loose structures, but tight, formal concerns. A line will be tight, a stanza will be tight, but the actual structure of the poem will go on and on. I imagine, as an example, a giant spider's web that could theoretically go on and on, but each little pattern is very tight within it. The origin and ending of the web are two sides—the tactile world and the other world—and the web bridges them. The overall structure suggests the infinite, the tight form suggests the temporal.

We'd all like poems to be immortal. Language is one way, as Eliot said, of combatting time: "these fragments I have shored against my ruins," he says in *The Wasteland*. Language becomes, then, also kind of a container, like the body is a container for the soul, the temporal for the eternal.

PM: There are a lot of references to names of places and people in the later poems. It's as if there is a deliberate attempt to root things so that you can explore the invisible more.

CW: Names, more than people, seem to me the objective correlative for this duality that we're talking about. The names are physical, but the person is gone, the person is nothing but the name is real. When I invoke a name, I'm invoking more than the person or more than the name. Sometimes the name, say of an artist, will then bring back, say, his use of light and space that means a great deal to me and which I then work into the poem. The name, then, is often explained in the poem. When you mention a name, you try to bring not only the blossom, but the whole root system as well. You use the name to try and recover the whole context.

PM: There's a sense of self that becomes important, too, not just in the self-portrait poems, but in a sort of signature of the language. In "Roma II," you have the lines—"The poem is a self-portrait / always, no matter what mask / you take off and put back on." Perhaps it's like that web—no matter what you say anywhere, you are revealing something about yourself if even in a distanced way. Everything's connected. There's the reference in "Southern Cross": "Everyone's life is the same life / if you've lived long enough." There's always a sense of the Other in the poems, and maybe that's related to the idea of the other side in "Southern Cross"—and in so many ways of the other poems. The self that is revealed is always an otherness.

CW: It's very difficult to talk about. It's easier to hint at in the poems. It's so much of a feeling that you have, or that you want to have because you feel there must be an otherness, and from time to time you know it in flashes. It's like the weather—what can you say about it? And yet this is probably the most important question, but it has to do with something, inside or outside, that is beyond our ability to even think clearly about. It's very hard to get a tactile correlative for it. You can get correlatives for all kinds of feelings, but it's hard to find an objective correlative for a subjective reality. You know it's out there, it's real, but it's so hard to track down.

All this is what gives language its sense of being, its sense of purpose, its resonance. That's why we have to use words like architecture, structure, real world and shallow world, tactilization—they're all attempts to describe this otherness that haunts us, that is more than physical things or physical type on the page. It's as if the myths were right—We all came from a world of light and are prisoners in a darkness, but we see these flashes, sense of close otherness, but can't find a way to explain it.

Language always knows more than we do. It is bigger than we are, than any of it practitioners. Sometimes it belies what you feel to be true, sometimes it reveals things you didn't know. Language is an otherness itself. It is my religion.

I also recognize there is a wonderful poetry of the here and now. Philip Larkin is the great exemplar of this. He does not want to think one minute about this otherness. I admire his work very much, and he may be one of my favorite living poets, but it's not what I am supposed to do.

PM: In "Mount Caribou at Night," you have the lines, describing the mountain—"and taking it back / To the future we occupied." It's sort of a proleptic memory. The shifting of tenses there suggests the complex weave of time, a movement between the now and the otherness of time.

CW: That's a true Manichaean line. If we come from the world of light and it's our own future as well as past, then we have a very comforting belief.

PM: Where do you think these notions of language and the other side will take you now? Technically, they have allowed you to scoop bigger and bigger pieces of the world in your poems as they become more expansive, but also to suggest, even more, the ethereal other.

CW: The trick is not to take in too much. That's why the balance between form and structure I talked about earlier is so important. The poems have become more anecdotal, but not narrative. I still distrust narrative because it seems to me that it can take over the language. I feel I am taking elements of narrative and bringing them back into poetry. Poetry is the main field if you want to work in language, understand its tactile qualities and what it can bring you. I like to think of myself as a painter bringing in more and more representative things to put into the flow of the architecture. I've never done that before. I can keep my interest in language at the same time I include more and more anecdotal things, objects, scenes. Dante is the best example I can think of—that great river of language upon which float all the anecdotal elements. I think you could argue over whether the linguistic line or the storyline dominates in Dante.

PM: Yes, sometimes, especially names or scenes as you mentioned earlier, there is this sense of the syntactic architecture of the language as you circle back to fill in the anecdote—and that might lead to another, and so on.

CW: They're wheels within wheels as it were, patterns within patterns—which goes back to the spider web idea. That seems to be the paradigm that I'm working in now. As long as you keep the parts interesting, the whole will take care

of itself. The three things you have brought up today are what interest me the most: language, the otherness, and architecture. But they are so difficult to talk about. And they themselves are part of a web of interrelationships.

THE ARGUMENT WITH MEMORY

An Interview with David Wojahn, 1986

PM: One of the things you've worried about is the danger of the poem's becoming sentimental. There are different ways in which you hold that off. One is a sort of visionary mode, and by that I mean the sort of prophetic vision that ends the "Elegy for James Wright." Or the image ends "Heaven For Railroad Men"—"You go flying forever, / the doors pulled open, / mailsacks scattered / into space like seed." "Miracles" would provide another example from the first book. These endings deflect away from the emotion, but make it more powerful finally, giving it a double edge, a doubling of intention.

DW: One of the things that I think I've learned from James Wright is that his very emotion threatens to turn into its opposite—transcendence into despair, despair into transcendence. Sometimes I'll feel compelled, either internally or externally, while I'm writing the poem—to address a subject that implies a great deal of desperation and terror—and I'll try somehow to resurrect it to its opposite. I think the problem that it sometimes causes is they'll begin in the quotidian and end in the bardic.

I think there's a real tendency sometimes for the speaker in my poems to want to achieve the bardic. It doesn't occur that often because I think that there is another tendency, which is to have the poem come to the brink of self-confrontation. For one reason or another the poem tries to hold off the confrontation until the end. The poem achieves a kind of stasis, a sort of uneasy tension that seems to me to be the kind of anxiety that most of us experience most of the time—though few of us ever allow ourselves to admit it as a proper way to end a poem. I like a poem that ends not with a sense of closure, but with a sense of tension, and I very often work harder at the ends of my poems than any other part of them in order to get that sense of duality.

PM: Another poem in this respect is "Satin Doll" from the new manuscript, *Glassworks*. It ends with the need to both hold on and let go. Like many poems of yours, it's resolved rhetorically, but not thematically. That seems to let the poem have a sense of going on beyond its end.

DW: I guess one of the things that I'm always suspicious of in the ending of poems are those endings which bring the poems to excessive closure. Very often what I'll do is to try to arrive at an ending that is rhetorically charged enough so that there doesn't seem to be a sense of finality thematically—that the sense of finality comes through the very rhetoric of what is being said at the end of the poem. The problem occurs if the poem goes for a rhetorical or linguistic flash the rest of the poem hasn't prepared for.

One of the exercises I often do with myself when I find a poem moving toward a conclusion that I find predictable is to go beyond that until I find another conclusion, and sometimes even to go beyond that. When people accuse me of being a narrative poet, it's really describing the sort of involuntary gesture that has happened when I found a conclusion that I'm not satisfied with, and decide from that conclusion to go on to another one. So I think I can see my stories not as linear narratives, but as a series of invented pyramids going down the page. If the poems tell stories, they tell them that way.

PM: Let's explore your sense of narrative. Your sense of narrative is more like what one gets with Williams's narratives—or Pavese's "image-story" notion, a progression of image, syntax, gesture.

DW: What always happens in literary history is that certain buzz words become fashionable, and right now *narrative* is the buzz word. Part of the reason for that is that for twenty or thirty years, the associational properties of imagery were one of the main elements that poets were writing about. As a response to that, a lot of people are trying to go away from the associational properties of language and emphasize instead its story-telling capabilities. I know that many students I've worked with at Vermont College are reading Pavese or American writers like Dobyns who embrace a narrative line. I'm also influenced by this movement because I'm interested in finding as many ways as possible to explore that area where short story and poetry seem to merge. Of course, I'm not trying to tell story-poems because I think that sort of skewed narrative quality that modern writing has given to story telling makes for too much complication for *simple* story-telling to be possible anymore. I'm interested in telling a kind of fractured narrative, and I'm interested in a narrative that has something to do with the process of memory. For me, memory and narrative seem to be almost interchangeable terms.

PM: One of the problems with simple narrative emphasis is that some of the rich qualities of language might be ignored because so much emphasis is given to plot. There's the same problem as there can be with any emphasis on plot—the formulaic. This doesn't always occur, but it's a danger.

DW: The problem is that the details or events that are drawing the narrative to a head have an important function in the overall effect of the story. Sometimes the details are the very things that a strong narrative line might eliminate. I think only Pavese, who's one of the greatest masters of narrative in this century, has been able to bring a compression and forcefulness to story telling without throwing out some of those extraneous details that are, in fact, necessary for the total effect.

PM: You mentioned memory earlier. You have the line, "since memory becomes revision," and the last poem in *Icehouse Lights* is a sort of revisionary poem, with a shifting back and forth to allegory. In "Dark-House Spearing," you get the revaluing of different kinds of detail. So memory becomes not so much a static thing in the past, a content that gets put into the poem, but something that the poem is constantly reworking.

DW: I was very influenced and impressed a few years ago by a book by a Russian psychologist named A. E. Luria called *The Mind of a Memorist*, a study he did on a man who had total recall. Luria discovered that rather than being an asset, the man's memory was a debility because this man was never allowed to put any event into any sort of perspective. He didn't look back on things as much as *relive* them. I certainly don't have total recall, but I don't have the ability to bring things into perspective very well. So I think my poems are an attempt to stop reliving the past and instead create a new past. There's a line in "Cold Glow: Icehouses" that says, "memory is not accomplishment," and which is a denial of Williams's idea in "The Descent." I like to think of my poems as an argument with memory.

PM: In "Ice-mist," you have somebody standing at the window; the end of "Evening Snow" has somebody watching. This is a signature gesture in many of the poems. It creates distance—the perspective of the watcher—but as the person begins to operate on the scene, memory and perspectivism start to work and the distance diminishes. Other things start to happen. There's a drama of the sort that I'd call "positioning."

DW: Yeah, there's an element of voyeurism in the poems. In attempting the perspective he wants, the writer often arrives at a failure of perspective. The process you describe is a kind of strange symbiosis, a strange identification, as in the opening poem of *Icehouse Lights* between the speaker and the workmen. It's an identification based on distance, and probably on wrong seeing that starts revisioning. My poems are about someone who's essentially solitary, lives mostly in the inner life and has to have the exterior would impose itself upon him.

The poems often end with an involuntary tenderness. If there's a kind of dialectic that goes on in the poems, it's almost always achieved by starting from a particular introspective position and finding by the end of the poem that the perspective is no longer working, or that it's horrible. There's a lot of judging of the speaker going on in the poems. Often, he doesn't like himself, but the point is to discover why any self-disgust or self-loathing is no longer a valid way of looking at the world for him. In other words, I think I'm often in the poem as somebody who is masquerading as a solitary, but in the end discovers, much against his will, that he isn't.

PM: The contexts in the second book seem to expand upon those in the first, perhaps doing more intensively what you are describing. The first section of *Glassworks* has a sense of undercutting about the themes of family relationships, kinds of attachment that lead to detachment finally. And the undercutting perhaps increases as the book goes on.

DW: I very much see the first section of *Glassworks* as the first section in a new book *and* the last section of *Icehouse Lights*, a treating of the themes in such a way that they no longer have to be themes anymore. I'm trying to come to enough provisional answers about these issues in the first section so that they don't become obsessions. That way, the poems in the later sections can meet the world in a different way.

If there's anything the speaker learns between section one and section two, it's that a sense of irony begins to show itself in various levels of detachment. In "Santorini," the speaker discovers not a sensitive poetic self, but only a kind of self-loathing. I found the poems in that second section very difficult to write; the section was a self-confrontation that had to arrive without any kind of romantic or bardic trapping. I wanted those poems to be ugly, unsparing, not filled with self-pity, but with chastisement. Those are perhaps limited ends, but important for the progress of the book towards a richer sensibility.

PM: The little poem called "Porchlights" is perhaps central to the book—there's a strange combination of lines in what seems a pristine scene. The characters are "secretly ashamed of loneliness." But that is undercut by "the whole intoxicating mess," before the poem goes back to a more tender moment. There's a lot of shifting, positioning, in those few lines. "Shadow Girl" and "The World of Donald Evans" make gestures of going off at the end, questioning.

DW: Yeah, that's interesting because the poems in *Glassworks* often parody those in *Icehouse Lights*; you get similar situations but different responses. There's more of a sense of incomprehension in the second book. Sometimes that strikes me as a more honest way of trying to deal with this turmoil than the straining to override it with lyricism that occurs in *Icehouse.*

Donald Evans wrote that the only thing that prompted him to do his work is the "why" of art and the "give up" of finding happiness. The thing I love about that statement is the sense of nonchalant resignation, a throwing his hands up that acknowledges the pain of the artist without self-pity. I guess for my own poems, I want them to be sentiment-full without being sentimental. Perhaps this irony, this benign resignation prompts that in the second book.

PM: Well, another way of getting distance and irony, of producing these effects is form. A lot of the poems in the new book have three-line forms and the like.

DW: I've been teaching a forms class the last couple of years, so I've been paying a little more attention to issues of prosody. More and more I'm finding that issues of free verse form, or more specifically, issues of metrics, traditional metrics, are becoming important in the poems. Many poems in *Glassworks* are in blank verse. I like to use that term loosely enough so that you can see that not all those lines are going to scan. Some of them are like the poem "Shadow Girl," which begins with about three stanzas of straight pentameter then ends with a kind of willingness to obliterate the pentameter. One of the reasons for this is that after giving a couple of years of formal readings, and listening to them, the ones that satisfy me the most are often where the reader emphasizes the iambic qualities of the reading, of the lines even when they don't seem to be written in, say, pentameter. I've been working more towards a blank verse line or syllabic line, but one where the lines are roughened up in the revision process.

That rhythm also enables larger statements to be made. A good example of that is Robert Penn Warren's "Masts at Dawn," where he is watching from his window one morning, seeing the "English / Finished fornicated in their ketches," and then seeing this dead cat move back and forth against the dock, and then so many other images of white and dark, living and dying, and all of a sudden the statement comes: "We must try / To love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, God." Now that's a commonplace, but the rhetorical power of that statement within the context of what has come beforehand makes the statement really exist, and really seem true to me.

PM: It's interesting that you spoke that essentially iambically, too.

DW: That's true, and the more I've wanted to play with statements in poems, the more I have needed an iambic surface.

PM: The desire for statements relates to another thing. There always seems a lot at stake in your poems. They don't deal with the occasional, the trivial. They go for the knock-out punch.

DW: If there's anything that offends me in contemporary poetry, it's that notion we have that someone can write a poem about anything. I think there are some poets who are splendid technically, who are prolific largely because the can decide to write a poem about an empty beer bottle and get something interesting. Picasso is an example of such a fertile imagination. But there are so many contemporary poets who are members of the "kitchen sink" school of poetry, who can write interestingly and engagingly about anything, but therefore end up writing about nothing of significance. Perhaps I'm moving into a moral area here, into what is an authentic and moral way of looking at the world.

PM: It's not so much the kitchen sink, but what you do with it.

DW: Yeah, that's netter; important subject matter has been trivialized by a clever approach.

PM: But this doesn't necessarily mean we have to be morose, to have a bleak, dark vision.

DW: Right. I do want to say there are a few poems in *Glassworks* that are purely celebratory. Philip Larkin was asked in an interview why he writes such unhappy poems, and he said, "Happiness writes white." The last thing you want to do when you are feeling happy, transcendent, whatever, is to go out and write a poem. I think that poems are often gestures of self-definition, but in those moments of celebration, you have already defined yourself. Some of the poets I admire most, though, achieve a kind of celebration—John Logan or Nazim Hikmet, for instance—but are not merely playful, merely wits.

THE STRANGENESS AND THE TRUTH
An Interview with Tom Lux, 1986

PM: Your poems have become, over the last decade, more discursive, less surrealistic. But one thing remains the same, the kind of leaps the language takes—"make the language take really desperate leaps," Roethke says in the *Notebooks*. "Solo Native" talks about the origins of language in such a leap. Maybe we could begin by talking about language in this way.

TL: Maybe I'll start with the Roethke connection. He is one of my favorite poets. I've always been interested in trying to make those kind of imaginative, associative leaps, which constitute a kind of metaphoric thinking. There certainly was a surrealistic influence in the early work, and a little still remains, but you're right to see it modified. The two sources for the surrealistic influence, especially when I was an undergraduate, were the French and the Spanish surrealists and the American surrealists like Tate and Knott, a mixture, then, of pure surrealism and so-called neo-surrealism. What attracted me to it was the richness, the wildness, the riskiness—a totally different way of looking at language; there's an irreverence about it, something revolutionary, and also the possibility of humor, a wackiness that is very appealing. But there was also an arbitrariness that I did not like, and I tried to grow away from it. Sometimes there would be an interesting image, but a dead end for the poem's development. It's not enough merely to invent, to find a strange image. I think that when you're younger, you don't know. Perhaps you don't care what you are discovering. So there's been this gradual change, but I don't want to give up the riskiness, a certain kind of wildness that makes an emotional connection to the reader.

I believe Hart Crane talks in "General Aims and Theories" about thinking metaphorically, which is basically thinking by association. But that sort of thinking is something we are taught away from; we're told it isn't good because it isn't logical. But it's really thinking on the blood level; primal thinking. The origins of language are basically metaphorical and the names for things, the words for things, were created by associations. That's what the first poem in *Sunday*, "Solo Native," is getting at.

PM: There's that epigraph by Thomas Cavendish in *Tarantulas on the Lifebuoy*: "This think is as true as it seemeth to any hearer to be strange." What you seem to be getting at is a clearer connection between strangeness and truth.

TL: Yes. I read an awful lot of history and I'm particularly interested in medieval history right through to about the 17th century. It was in reading history that I stumbled across that quote. I have a book full of little quotes I would like to use some day.

PM: There's been a change, too, in the way you conceive of the line. There's perhaps a greater emphasis on the paragraph and sentence, or a counterpointing of these with the line, though the line remains crucial.

TL: I'm still totally and absolutely dedicated to the notion that the line is the unit by which poems are made, and I believe poems have to be written line by line. Every line has to be examined individually, regardless of what comes before and after it. I try to give my poems a test int hat way by looking at each line, by isolating it, and saying "is this interesting as a unit of language?"—"is this almost like a poem itself?"—"or a poetic fragment?" But you're right that there is a greater emphasis on the whole for me now. I just have more of a sense while I'm writing the poem. I have to listen to the poem and try to hear what it's trying to tell me. I've also worked consciously on trying to enrich and expand the line. I've taken a more conscious interest in the music of the line, the texture of the line and the overall poem. So I've lengthened my lines, as perhaps most poets do as they get older. I wouldn't use the word paragraph, though, because it suggests prose, the arbitrariness of prose breaks. In poetry, you have to think about the interplay of words and sounds.

PM: The way your poems seem to move is that you have these little progressions of sound and image that push the flow of the poem along. But there are also other impulses that surface here and there in which the poem has space to

follow out. So there's a double motion, the overall progression and these small diversions, and the diversions always reconnect with the general flow, or provide a subtext—sort of like theme and variations in music.

TL: That's nice that you hear that. I think it comes partly from the fact that I've never been an idea poet, and don't often write a poem based on a literal experience. Most of my poems get started with a phrase or particular image, sometimes simply a title, a rhythm, and these tend to build very slowly. I write slowly anyway and rarely finish anything within a couple months. That way I'm also forced to listen to the poem, trust my unconscious instincts that are kicked off by whatever tiny thing begins the poem. I don't do all this consciously, but seem to work between letting my intuition follow these things and going back to work consciously on the poem. My work seems to straddle consciousness and unconsciousness.

I have tended to work, over the last several years, on batches of poems at a time. I save stuff up until I get whatever I think is enough to get five, six, seven, sometimes even twenty poems, and then work on them together. I'll never try to have an idea or experience and then beat the poem through to some sort of conclusion. So I think it helps for me to have that luck or ability to follow what might crop up in the poem because I'm not trapped or stuck with it as a single notion or idea for only one poem.

I won't start a poem unless I feel confident of its possibilities, that it can go somewhere. Actually, in the last year or so, I am writing a bit more from experience, but the process remains the same.

PM: In the chapbook *Like A Wide Anvil From The Moon The Light*, there's another kind of movement. The opening lines seem to provide the basis of the structure and movement for the rest of the poem.

TL: All twenty of those were written together with the idea of a sequence in mind. None began with more than a few lines, some with just a phrase, or a first line. They came gradually over about a year. One of the things I try to do to make things happen is to set an arbitrary formal condition; before I began those poems I said they were going to all be twenty-three-line poems. Given that form, I was able to move around from subject to subject, through various kinds of obsessions. One of the obsessions is going back to a childhood farm, another seems to be spiritual or religious, another seems to be sexual.

PM: The introduction to the *Massachusetts* chapbook talks about going back, and the first poem is about origins. The rest of the book gradually supplants the notion of origins, and the pastoral impulse gets supplanted. Towards the end, say with "The Oxymoron Sisters," the original impulse seems deserted and something new emerges. In a way, the whole book traces a movement from experience towards diversions and loops from the language—sort of what you were just talking about.

TL: Perhaps. That's a sort of arbitrary grouping of poems, with a mix like you describe. "The Thirst of Turtles" is perhaps the most experiential, which is to say it's still mostly invented. But one of the things I'm proud about in that poem is the way I included all that real stuff about turtles. Their meat is apparently very bloody, and they have tears when they come out of the water. The stuff about the sailors watching is also true; one of the things they used to think was mermaids were turtles fucking. I like doing that, including historical or other kinds of fact, but I have to be careful not to be didactic.

I've written some poems recently that have to do with social and political themes. They tend to be harshly anti-capitalistic, harshly anti-imperialistic. I think if there's any general tendency in the last couple of years, it's that I'm becoming much less interested in myself, less interested in my own personal griefs and gripes, and I tend to be more interested in the world. The tendency began five years ago, though it's probably always been there. I admire the ability of James Wright and Carolyn Forche to be able to do that—have a political poem that is also textured, metaphoric, wild. I think the challenge is to write a poem that is interesting as a poem and doesn't compromise any of your values about language.

PM: I think you have to begin by thinking of the language around certain events—to think of the history of things as the discourse around them. That's what Michel Foucault does, analyze history as a record of documents whose metaphors reveal values, meanings.

TL: Yeah. But Foucault is often so confusing. I prefer straight, narrative history. I'm not much interested in analysis or general trends. I'm interested in the particulars of day-to-day history, say the daily life during the time of Charlemagne. I love knowing what the regular people did, how they got along, how they talked to each other. I'm also interested in the history of Africa and the Middle East, both of which are so important today. And the Black Plague and Spanish Inquisition, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, diseases.

PM: Bachelard talks about the language of things as distinct from things. He says that poetic language is sort of like Braille—there's a sort of feel and texture to it.

TL: I like that analogy. I like the almost physical, tangible bumps and grooves and planes and edges of language. Connecting with that the physical level is a way to connect with your reader on many levels, from the level of music to the level of meaning. What's important is that a poem, as Eliot says, does something to you, almost physically, that it moves you. Emily Dickinson says the poem should give you a chill or a thrill. What does *The Wasteland* mean? Does anybody know? But it has a feel, a movement of sound and image. Of course, that attitude can be easily abused.

PM: Besides sound an image, there's also syntax that provides the music—pauses, shifts of direction—and they constitute what might be called voice.

TL: I'm very conscious of trying to create a believable speaking voice in the poems. I want them to be someone actually talking, not casually. Pound says we have to believe that someone in an agitated emotion could speak this way. I used to think I was primarily a lyric poet, but maybe I'm more of a monologist. Maybe I'm more narrative that I thought I was, though I'm usually bored with narrative poetry, and there seems to be a great deal of it written today. I don't think it's compact enough, not distilled enough, doesn't have enough linguistic texture. What's more important is timing, the ways and pace at which things are introduced. That's really hard to talk about, though.

PM: It's like telling a story—you become a different narrator to each type of person you tell a version to. And you might change your timing.

TL: And also, a sense of editing needs to emerge. I've always noticed that when people tell a story, they tell too much, and the extra stuff is usually personal—how they got to the situation, how it happened—instead of getting right to the point of the story.

PM: Another interesting aspect of voice is the growth in the sense of perspective and point of view that has emerged. The perspective has become, well, not ironic, but includes a sort of double vision. "It Happened To My Uncle" ends, for instance, with the speaker knowing something is both right and wrong. What's developed is more of a sense of balancing opposites, perhaps.

TL: That's a good question, and I think there's a very definite progress from irony in the earlier work. Irony is basically pretty easy, and maybe more of a younger person's way out. Parallel ambivalences, double thinking—I think that's all true. I think what's going on in the Uncle poem is that the speaker is both trying to admit he has been blessed, that he's had a good life, that the world is, in fact, generous. But, on the other hand, there are all these negative things as well. I think the poem is one of those social-political ones we were talking about earlier, because there's a consciousness of the ambivalences associated with the injustices of this country—as great a country it is—and the speaker tries to admit them. There are contradictions . I'm not afraid of contradiction. I think contradiction is very much a part of life, and it's something I feel all the time. I don't have any kind of need to be right all the time. I think that contradiction, by its collisions, can lead to new insights. Poems should be quests for discovery. Even if you don't discover anything, you've made a beginning, an inquiry. It's the process that's important, that I'm interested in.

PM: The ways the books set up that process are also interesting. You have a tendency in the structures of your books to work sort of inductively, from shorter, tentative poems, to longer poems at the end. And a book like *Sunday* begins by talking about origins and ends by talking about ends.

TL: The new book also ends with a long poem. The last two sections of the Tarantula chapbook are the first two sections of a triptych that will end the book. I think the structure you described is part of an attempt to always try something more ambitious. I like trying to push the lyric, that's one of the things I like about Hart Crane. As far as the structure of the smaller poems goes, some are invented forms, say, coming back in a sort of circular motion—some use an established form like the sestina. Form forces you to imagine in ways you would not normally think. I think I have an inner need for order. One of the things I don't like about some poetry is the kind of sloppiness, an open-ended, arbitrary sloppiness. This is not the way I run my personal life, but it is very important for me in my poems.

Excerpts from Various Conversations from *The Poetry Miscellany*

From OUR SHAPE OF IDENTITY
An Interview with David Wagoner, 1986

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PM: The transformer you were talking about seems to have a lot to do with magic. You confess in "Filling Out a Blank" that you once wanted to be a stage magician.

DW: I was a stage magician briefly, and it was a temptation to me except that I discovered before long—and especially after I tried some acting—that I didn't belong on stage. So I have up that notion. I still do magic in private.

PM: That comes through in your writing; you have a lot of poems that deal with illusions and acts, tricks and escapes.

DW: That's what I was talking about. I think a great many young people, especially men, go through a stage where they're very interested in sleight-of-hand and tricks. Psychologically, it is obviously connected to be more powerful than one is. It's at a time in the adolescence when one is severely tested again and again, either by outside world or by oneself, where you're often discovering limits to your power that you don't like, and so you try to transcend them. The wish to be a shaman, the wish to be a stage magician—those two wishes have much in common, and the poet is somewhere in there. The stage magician is one metaphor for the poet. To transform reality by naming, to own it by naming it, to create scenes that never existed, to move objects in an all-powerful way—these are, I think, part of what one experiences as a writer. I think the image of the magician is one that is on-going with me. I have a whole cluster of these actors, which are my road company in a way. The bum, the comedian, the magician, the shaman, are certainly of that group.

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From THE DOUBLE MOTION OF THE POEM
An Interview with Greg Orr, 1986

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PM: Sometimes, perhaps, even the vertical movement, in the more recent poems, has that narrative impulse such as when you have the boy with his arms like Christ descending, falling

GO: The gesture is of Christ's ascent, but the inevitable is the reality, the descent. The truth is that all the risings and fallings are impulses towards resurrection—the tension between rising from the earth and being buries underneath it, a tension that is often never resolved. One of the major mysteries the poems come up against is death, so it is natural to have this movement. Another sort of resurrection occurs in language—a recurring fantasy that poets have. The whole personal theme of my brother's death gives personal edge to the mystery of death for me. It's not death, but just that sudden, absolute stopping that's horrible. My recurring dream—I have it at least twice a week—is of being on an edge, a cliff or something, and it can take a hundred different forms. My imagination has never been free of that—one step, and it's down. Death is always present as that stopping. Imagination provides meanings against that abyss or beyond it. The standard religious consolations don't seem to me credible, so I have poetry, which is a private religion—but since it partakes of universal human longings, it functions for other people, too. It doesn't console like religion, but it provides possible images to transcend death.

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PM: Most of the recent poems have a more geographic imagination. I don't mean just the movement out of Italy, Haiti, other places, but the way an image gathers a whole geography as well as a history around it.

GO: It seems quite possible to me. At one point, I think I most of all wanted to be a painter, and certainly you aren't permitted to paint motion in a representational painting. Instead you have to pick something to focus on that crystallizes the experience for your viewer. I think I would rather have been a painter, still. Painting has a kind of sensory immediacy that I love. On the other hand, it has trouble getting mediacy in the way language does. I mean, I'm not sorry I became a poet.

From THE OPENING WITHIN US

An Interview with Greg Pape, 1984

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PM: What relationship do you think this has to the need for forgetting? You open "At the Edge of the River" with—"Sometimes you must forget everything / then remember it all."

GP: The way I see the poem is—here I am, standing on the edge of the whatever I'm going to think of. If you really want to know what's at stake, you have to erase the blackboard of preconceptions—whatever you thought was important—and then, as Rilke says in his *Letters to a Young Poet,* try to experience what you love and lose like some first human being.

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PM: There's a real harsh world portrayed in the poems, so that the embracing gesture becomes all the more authentic. Yet there are more victories.

GP: The harshness of this world is something I have to digest, make sense of. I've learned a lot from reading and from writing. I think I found myself in poems when I needed to when I was a young kid. The language—I trusted it even then—freed me and made it possible for me to deal with the experiences of my life. Maybe it is a kind of power, too. Sometimes poems don't have to just look back with an awful feeling, but can do something for you, re-see something. They have to put the world on the page and then do something with it—not just photograph it, but do something with it.

From THE LANGUAGE OF MYSTERY

An Interview with Bin Ramke, 1984

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BR: In many ways, memory is a deliberate calculation, produced at will. You mentioned a poem about the death of my mother, and she's still alive. There are a number of poems to my daughter written at the time I had no children. A number of poems read like reminiscences of childhood. Fabricated—they are things I make up that didn't happen, but that possibly could happen. Of course, the reader wouldn't necessarily know whether it happened to me.

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BR: I think you have to write each poem as if it were the last one you were going to do.

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BR: I've been interested in an article by Walter Ong, S. J., about time. He sees modern poetry as facing a problem. We tend to think of time as repeating, as things happening over and over again—the 24-hour day, the year. It's a primitive notion, this cyclic of time. And yet, prehistoric time had a say of 21 hours, not 24. We're slowing down, and I don't think we can come back to the world with quite the same attitude once we know that. Nothing, in fact, repeats, and here we have poetry based upon the idea of repetition. It affects the very artform itself. So, the problem is how to deal with contemporary knowledge and our new sense of the universe. Maybe that's why our fictions have more linear and less cyclic structures. Maybe that's why fictions seem more necessary.

From HERE AND THERE

An Interview with Paula Rankin, 1984

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PR: I think we get a surer sense of what we can say. One of my friends, a non-writer, a little while ago criticized a rhyme—"warble-garble." It calls attention to itself. Years ago I would have taken that advice, and I still tell my students not to draw unnecessary attention to themselves. Maybe it's that we get more guts, that we can say we need those sounds, that rhythm, everything that makes the phrase ours. All this might be related to the fact that when you're younger, you're probably not talking so much about experiences you actually had. A lot of the times, you're borrowing trouble. "Don't borrow trouble," your mother says, but you do, and then later on, when you're older, you have plenty of your own. Maybe that's what gives you the authority in the voice to do different things.

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PR: William Matthews is the most effective thinker regarding the fictions that we've construed—he uses in his poems the word "fiction" rather than lie. In his "A Happy Childhood," there are certainly fictions. It's really a question of point of view. We might see somebody walking out of a house in a huff, or see something happening peripherally, and we interpret it—but, even if we're very careful observers, we bring our own associations and understandings to it, and we know it may not be that way at all. You can tell the truth about your daughter growing up, and when she grows up she'll tell truths about her growing up—except they are not going to be the same stories. I think, from my own experience, that the more relationships and friendships we have, the more we understand the complexities and

perspectives that any zillion number of people would have toward one incident. The lie isn't central, then, but our trying to be honest with those we love, realizing how they can perceive incidents differently. Of course, no one wants to pay for the facts if they're not what they're supposed to be, and there's that childhood element. There can be just lots of things you don't want to own up to. But I also mean these fictions—truths from carious perspectives—that multiply. Maybe you look back at your life and see so much of it as a lie—you were a bad mother or father, a bad wife or husband. Looking out that window is looking for lies, and living one. I wouldn't go back and do that now; I understand more about perspectives, points of view. Matthews says we choose our own fictions, the ones we can live with. Like counterfeit money, it's so like the real thing that people will cash it. There are duplicates in the poems, sure, and I think they have to do with what I would call mutually exclusive desires. Desires that are simultaneous, equally strong, but contradictory. Fictions sometime seem so much more true—sometimes. Maybe it's because if you can tell yourself a plausible lie, then you can begin again.

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PR: As a poet, you have two lives, two sets of friends—family and associates, and your inner life in the poems and your life in the world. You have to decide to plunge, not to balance, to move ahead, not just hold on.

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PR: You tell your students that the reason poetry gets more and more exciting the older you get is because you really do discover things in the process of writing. For better or worse, when you're younger, no matter what anybody tells you, you have a little glimmer in the back of your mind that you want to write a poem about blank. You already have this glimmer of how it's going to end or turn out. So you end up with these things, usually with the titles wrapped around them. Now I let my poems end up in a mess, with some frazzling, because everything's always come unraveled. In the past, we'd always be thinking about "the" end line.

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