

The Sweetness of Nothing

Questions and Answers with Edward Hirsch
at the Joshua Ringel Memorial Reading, May 2006

This year's Ringel Reading, co-sponsored by The Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth, Gilman School, and Teachers & Writers Collaborative, featured the poet Edward Hirsch, who read a brief selection of poems before opening up the event to an extended question and answer session with those in attendance. The questions elicited far-ranging, passionate, and warmly humorous responses from Hirsch, who offered a view of poetry as both an intimate and universal act. The following is a transcript of that exchange.

Q: How do you get your ideas for your poems? Like the cotton candy poem—do you just see cotton candy and then write it down and then two days later you think, oh, that would make a great line for that poem...?

E.H: I wish I knew how to say this more exactly because my answer is not very precise. I think every poem starts a little differently, but a poem doesn't usually start with an idea. At some point maybe an idea will kick in, but a poem for me usually starts with some words, or a memory, or something I can't forget, or a thought. Then it starts to take some shape; it has to have a formal idea. For me that idea has to be something that you're working through and you discover in the process of writing it. The poem "Cotton Candy"¹ came from literally seeing someone eating cotton candy and remembering that I had eaten some long ago. Then I thought, "What is cotton candy? It's nothing. It's just the sweetness of air, just sugar and air." That, I thought, is just the sweetness of breathing, and I started writing about that. And in the process of writing the poem I discovered what I think is one of its hinges, which I hadn't begun with: In the poem, my grandfather and I were on a bridge, and the ineffability of the cotton candy versus the iron nature, the sturdy cables of the bridge, struck me as a poetic idea. That was where the poem lifted off for me. It was a way to memorialize my grandfather and also say something about breathing. Because I think poetry is breath. That is one of the mysteries of poetry. Sometimes I'm amazed by the power of poetry, that these words can express so many of the deepest feelings we have. And other times I'm struck with how little we have to go on, that all poetry has to come down to just these sounds in our mouths. Syllables and words. The sweetness of nothing, really. Language itself.

¹ Forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*.

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Q: My question is about the struggle for refinement: Do you have a system for how you return to a poem and continue to refine, or is there a way to know that you've reached that place where it's complete?

E.H: Paul Valéry famously said that a poem is never finished, it is only abandoned. So there is that notion that you do your best—you labor for as long as you can—and then you give it up. But there is also a sense sometimes of a poem closing. If you think of a poem as analogous to a piece of music, then there are some formal qualities that operate in the working through of a poem that—like musical qualities—can come to completion. There's a very good book, a theoretical book, by Barbara Herrnstein Smith called *Poetic Closure*, and in it she writes about how poems end. Of course, the way they end is related to how they begin, and what expectations are fulfilled and defied. Herrnstein Smith relies very heavily on a book by Leonard Meyer called *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, a very smart, thoughtful book where he utilizes information theory to understand how pieces of music operate. So my idea is that a poem is also a work of art where you are working through formal elements, and when the formal elements and the metaphor are taken as far as you can go, when you feel there's some resolution, then your poem is concluded.

Q: (*from a child in the audience*) Do you make any rhyming poems, or are they all expressionism poems?

E.H: He's saying, "What's wrong with you? How come you don't have any rhyming poems?" Well that's a good question. I like rhyming poems. I like a lot of poems that rhyme fully, but I also like poems that rhyme subtly, and have half rhymes. Actually two of the poems I read to you rhymed, but it's a little hard to hear the rhymes. One was called "The Poet at Seven," and the other was called "My First Theology Lesson," but they rhyme in what is called half rhyme rather than full rhyme. Say "bag" and "lag" would be a full rhyme. But "lag" and "beg" would be a half rhyme. Do you see what I mean? It's a little harder to hear, but I like these half rhymes that delay a little. They are rhymes, but they make the poem sound a little more like speech to me. Both Dickinson and Yeats were masters of the dissonant half rhyme. For some reason I like to repress the rhyme, but I think it's an important element in poetry. Joseph Brodsky liked to think of rhyming as two words that were meant to be together, words that are somehow restrained and long to find their way back to each other. I like that notion.

Q: One of the things I love about reading your poetry on the printed page is the form the poem often takes, and I can see the kinds of things you just alluded to. But it's much harder for me to see these things as a listener to poetry being read aloud. I wonder if you think about that at all when you think about how to read your poems aloud.

E.H: I just participated in something called “The People’s Poetry Gathering” in New York and there were all these different kinds of poets, so I asked some of the young people who were organizing it, “Well, what kind of a poet am I?” And they said, “Oh, you’re a *page* poet. We read you on the page.” It’s like a small splinter group of poets now, some little category of poets who write on the page. What I think you’re pointing out is the fact that [reading a poem and listening to a poem] are two different things. My book, *How to Read a Poem*, is an advocacy on behalf of reading, and it’s about what happens when you read poems to yourself, when you’re alone with a poem. I wrote the book to advocate on behalf of that experience, not just reading poems aloud. When I’m writing a poem, I do listen to it, I do try to hear it, and it’s the same when I read someone else’s poetry, but I hear it with what I would call the inner ear. And there are elements—eye rhymes, the way the poem lays out on the page—that give it a visual, concrete dimension that can’t be translated. But on the other hand a poem does come alive in a certain way when the words are made visible in the air. So the experiences are related but they’re not the same thing. I think the advantage of reading poems aloud is that there’s a dramatic line in the poem and you really hear the way it works, the way it washes over you.

The disadvantage of the experience is that you can’t stop on line three and say, “I like that metaphor.” This is one of the problems that I, myself, have at poetry readings. Someone reads a line of poetry and I like that line and I’d like to think about it, but if you stop to think about the line you miss the rest of the poem. I mean, an oral poem has the qualities of just going forward, and there are many oral poets who I admire very much when I hear them recite their poems aloud, but when I go home and read them I don’t find the same qualities. Because then you can stop, then you can reread—in a way you have to. There are certain subtleties in writing—formally especially—that you can appreciate when you read poems to yourself. Oddly enough, I think, people are a little more accustomed now to hearing poems read aloud than they are to the experience of reading them. They’re related but different experiences.

Q: Has the way you write and revise changed over time?

E.H: The other day I was thinking about when I first started writing poetry. I wrote everything right straight through. I realize now that the poems were terrible but I was really very happy then, because I thought everything I wrote was so great. I didn’t care if people didn’t understand it—I just thought everyone else was dim. I mean, I was really a bad poet but I was feeling quite good about myself in those days as a teenager. As time goes on you get better as a poet but you start to feel worse as a person. Because you are continually trying to make something permanent. You’re up against your art.

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Some poets write a whole poem and then revise it. I can't do that anymore. I write some lines, and then I change the lines, and then I write lines five and six, and then I change lines two and three, and then I write lines seven and eight. I was once doing a Q&A like this with the novelist Jane Smiley and she said if she had a student who wrote like that she'd stop him

immediately, because no one would ever finish a novel that way. You can't be that self-critical and write a novel. So I don't recommend this way of writing. On the other hand, if you're revising as you go, the result is that when you finish you're pretty much finished. I mean, it's gone through the wringer. You've done your best and at a certain point you let it go, you send it out into the world. I don't think my job is to be Milton. I wish I could be, but my job is to write the best poems I can write. And that's honorable, I think. The shame is not in failing to write great poetry. The shame is in not trying hard enough, or not learning enough about your craft, not working hard enough, not learning what you can about poetry, not dedicating yourself to your art. If you've dedicated yourself to your art and you've given it everything you have, then that's the best you can do. But most people don't do that.

Q: I think that Paul Celan's poems are poems that come into me without my fully understanding them. You have written a memorial poem to him ["In Memoriam Paul Celan"]. Did you know him? Did you only read him in translation? Did you read him in the original? Could you tell me a little bit about him?

E.H.: I think Celan is an unprecedented case in the history of literature. He grew up in Romania, and he wrote in German—he lived in a German-speaking enclave in Romania. Both of his parents died during the war as a result of internment. He really became a poet after that. He moved to France and in 1970 he committed suicide. And the reason I think his case is unprecedented is here you have one of the great lyric poets of Germany, a poet really in the tradition of Hölderlin and Goethe, a great lyric voice. But because of what had happened to him, because of the way he inevitably felt about the German language, his poems became very, very conflicted. In a way he's a poet who writes against himself at every point. He keeps interrupting himself, he keeps fracturing himself, he keeps defying himself. His poetry has to go through all these darknesses and silences and terrors because he despised the language that enabled him to be a poet at all. This is a remarkable case.

If you know *How to Read a Poem*, you'll recognize that one of the central notions of the book is something I learned from Paul Celan, which is that a poem is a message in a bottle. He says, "a poem can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps." That notion is very important to me because it suggests that poetry—a manifestation of language—is essentially dialogue. It suggests that there's a

reader in the future. It implies hope. Now I read Celan in translation, I don't really know German well enough to read him in the original. It's also true, though, that one can almost read him without knowing German perfectly because he turns to the roots of the language and makes up words the way Joyce does in *Finnegan's Wake*.

My poem "In Memoriam Paul Celan" was based on one of Celan's own poems. He wrote a poem that I love, "In Memoriam Paul Eluard," in honor of a French poet who has meant a lot to me, and so I decided to model my own poem about Celan on Celan's poem about Eluard. Every once in a while you write something that shocks you, and in writing that poem about Celan I shocked myself, because the last line came to me in a way I still don't understand. The last line of the poem is "Let God pray to us for this man." It overwhelmed me to write that, but it seemed something in his honor.

Q: There's a professor here of poetry, who I hope I'm not misrepresenting, but he says that one of the real powers of poetry, if not the real power of poetry, is that it creates people, and as a poet you create people in your poems, especially in elegies. Do you agree with this?

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E.H: I think you are referring to Allen Grossman, and his notion—which is very movingly set out in a book called *The Sighted Singer*²—that poetry is a way by which we achieve our personhood, by which we become more human. I love this notion. It means that our humanity is something that we attain; it's not something that we're just given. Now I wouldn't say that you're aware of this larger goal every time you're writing a poem, but you are trying to make something present. For me, at the heart of lyric poetry is the notion that we're going to die. There's something about this that you can never reconcile yourself to. Poetry is a way to try to defy death, to speak against it, to say there's something that I won't let die. The elegies are very clear examples of poetry trying to write in defiance of death. It's a way of memorializing something. And so as Grossman suggests you bring forward a human face and you won't let it be erased. I love this notion of poetry and of the job that poetry has to do in the world, which is to keep something alive. That there's something unbearable in our passing and that we need to write against it.

I mean, in all history there has never been a civilization without poetry, and there are two elements in every poetry, as far as I know. Every poetry has an element of lamentation, or the elegy, to ease the dead on their passage to the other world, to speak about the dead, to lament the loss of the dead, to keep the dead present before us. That would be the poetry of grief. And then the flip side of it is the poetry of celebration and the poetry of praise. Every poetry has a poetry of praising the world for being as it is; for things being alive. And it seems to me that that praise, that celebration, is also related to our transience. It is also related to holding onto something. So I like the notion that our personhood is something we have to attain, and that poetry participates in that,

² *The Sighted Singer: Two Works On Poetry for Readers and Writers* by Allen Grossman with Mark Halliday.

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in the creation of ourselves, in making us more human.

Q: So if you think of poetry as defiance of death, is it ironic then that so many poets commit suicide?

E.H: I don't know. The biography of some poets who have committed suicide seems different to me than the work of poetry itself, which I think is life-enhancing. I think poetry is related to health. Many poets who have committed suicide just couldn't bear to live and something was just too much for them, but their work speaks of something else, I think. To me, there's always something hopeful in even the most despairing poetry. Even when John Clare writes from a mental hospital, "I am: yet what I am none cares or knows / My friends forsake me like a memory lost / I am the self-consumer of my woes. . . ." Even when he writes that, the fact that he would craft it into a rhyming poem, that he would make something out of it, strikes me as hopeful. The reason I say it's hopeful is that he's not just turning away in despair. He's taking that despair and trying to create something. And that form of creating something reaches out to a future listener. It suggests there's something social in the act of making poetry because it suggests that there is someone who can understand. You are sending something into the world. So I would say that poets in their personal lives sometimes break down, and sometimes they have episodes of madness, and sometimes they go crazy and sometimes they kill themselves. But poetry itself doesn't turn away from life; it turns back to life, even if it's on the edge of despair, because the nature of turning something into poetry is turning toward a human community. It suggests there is some hope because there is some future listener. There is some outstretched hand there.

When Celan wrote that a poem is a message in a bottle, he himself was paraphrasing something that Osip Mandelstam said, in a little piece he wrote in 1916 called "On the Addressee." Mandelstam thought of the poet as a seafarer who tosses a sealed bottle into the ocean waves, containing his name and a message detailing his fate. "Wandering along the dunes many years later," Mandelstam says, "I happen upon it in the sand. I read the message, note the date, the last will and testament of one who has passed on. I have the right to do so. I have not opened someone else's mail. The message in the bottle was addressed to its finder. I found it. That means, I have become its secret addressee."

You do have the feeling when you're reading poetry as if some things have been directed just to you. And this is something that poetry can do. It speaks to you so powerfully, so personally, that it's almost as if it was written just for you. The most extraordinary notion of this I know is that sometimes a poem speaks so completely to you that you feel almost as if you have authored the very thing you've read. In the forward to his first book of poems the great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges apologized to the reader. He said something clever, funny, and true. He wrote, "If in the following pages there is some successful verse or other, may the reader forgive me the audacity of having written it before him. We are all one; our inconsequential minds are much alike, and circumstances so influence us that it is something of an accident that you are the reader and I the writer—the unsure, ardent writer—of my verses." I mean, I find that

“Poetry is as ancient as the drawing of a horse at Lascaux or an Egyptian hieroglyphic, and yet it also feels especially relevant to a post-9/11 world, a world characterized by disaffection and materialism, a world alienated from art. The horrors we face daily around the globe—terrorist bombings, ethnic cleansing, the ravages of the HIV epidemic, children becoming soldiers—challenge us to find meaning in the midst of suffering. Poetry answers this challenge. It puts us in touch with ourselves. It sends us messages from the interior and also connects us to others. It is intimate and secretive; it is generously collective.”

— Edward Hirsch, from *Poet's Choice*, Harcourt, Inc., 2006

