

CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY POETS

R A N G E

OF THE

P O S S I B L E

interviews by

Tod
Marshall

RANGE OF THE POSSIBLE

CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY
POETS

TOD MARSHALL

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A NOTE ON THE INTERVIEWS

Although these interviews were conducted over the course of a decade, I've attempted to maintain consistency and focus in the discussions. Methodologically, I've asked some of the same questions—usually framed a bit differently—of the poets. Of course, my limits and obsessions—poetry and religion, Modernism, the shaping of a poetic line, to name only a few—have certainly guided the questioning.

INTRODUCTION

Born between 1941 and 1959, the poets in this collection have lived within a variety of compelling contexts. For some, the Second World War and its attendant images and realities shaped their childhoods; for others, the post-war boom and ideological recoil from that consumerist transformation were formative contexts; for all, the images of protest, violence, and unrest sparked by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War defined the decades of their early years. Further, the aggressive rhetoric and political polarity of the Cold War guided foreign policy for a good portion of their lives (Korea, détente, the Cuban missile crisis, “star wars”). Nuclear holocaust’s looming specter darkened all of their childhoods and, despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has continued to shadow their days. Just as ICBM’s and other weapons of mass destruction multiplied in the latter decades of the twentieth century, this list of historical contexts proliferates: environmental devastation; overpopulation; numerous “small” wars in “third world countries” such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, Argentina, and Afghanistan; continued conflict in the Middle East; the emergence of terrorism as political tactic; *glasnost*; corporate colonialism; and the obvious impact of the oil industry on everything from United States’ foreign policy to recent elections. These are but a few of the national and global backdrops, all of which say little about the influential

technological developments of the period: from television and the polio vaccine to “the web,” cell phones, and the prospect of species ending biological warfare. Although not defined by a series of specific conflicts or events like the writers of modernity, this generation of American poets has lived in an era of hyperbolic change, ongoing globalization, ever present tension, and, for the intellectually and emotionally engaged, palpable anxiety.

Of course, another development during these writers’ lifetimes has been the emergence of a pervasively consumerist American culture. To put it in different terms, these writers’ lives have chronologically overlapped with the crystallization of much of American culture around the salty core of selfish consumption—conspicuous, yes, but probably more grotesque than Thorstein Veblen could have ever imagined. From commercials and infomercials to the cancerlike expansion of fast food chains and every possible saleable product (made in China) at the ubiquitous Walmart (Kmart, Shopco, and/or Sears), all aimed, in many ways, at easing the life of the oh-so-fragile, oh-so-devouring, and oh-so-neurotic self: as the pie graphs of *USA Today* tell us, the latter half of the twentieth century in America has been as defined by this consumptive gluttony as the frequently “distant” grindings of history.

The possible contextual angles which have impacted these poets stretch even to employment: one might argue that American prosperity and the attendant consumerism coupled with the “opening up” of the American university admissions system in the early seventies have led to the institutionalizing of a great deal of American poetry and, along with all of the “legitimization” of academic standing, taken away what was previously one of the primary difficulties of the poet: how to pay the bills. Although some critics have written disparagingly of such a partnership, the comprehensive effects are still rather uncertain. That American poetry and academia are conjoined is not; among the poets in this collection, all but Lee and Addonizio teach at a college or university, and even these two poets teach part-time for support.

These are merely a few observations; I am neither economist nor historian nor psychologist nor pomo-pop-culture-Americanist. However, I feel confident asserting that the historical and cultural contexts in which these poets grew up and in which they've written were myriad and influential. Certainly, many of the writers discuss these contexts with more exacting detail, precise elaboration, and engaging specificity in regards to their own lived experience than any introductory note. Whatever the case may be, poetry is at the center of these discussions, and I am more confident describing the literary milieu in which these writers have found their voices—even if such literary contexts are equally divergent.

The great modern American writers—Eliot, Moore, Hughes, Pound, H.D., Williams, and Stevens—all died during the lifetimes of the poets in this collection. As one generation passed, a “mid-century” generation moved to the fore, and a third, of which the poets in this book are representative, emerged. Born in the first decades of the century, Lowell, Bishop, Berryman, Olson, Roethke, Rexroth, Bronk, Duncan, Everson, Rukeyser, Oppen, and Niendecker published their first significant work primarily during the forties and fifties. Further, Sexton, Dickey, Ammons, Merrill, Plath, Hall, Rich, Ashbery, O'Hara, Kizer, Hayden, Wright, Levertov, and Kinnell—the “younger siblings” of the older mid-century poets—began to write and to publish their enduring work during the same time period. Hence, when the writers in this book began reading poetry, many of the mid-century's generation had already begun to have a shaping influence on the work that the next generation was to write. However, what's most astonishing to me about this partial yet representative list of poets who rose to prominence during the forties, fifties, and sixties is the wide range of writing: the aesthetic leaps from Lowell to Olson to Roethke to Merrill to Niendecker to Ashbery to Sexton to Wright are lengthy. Consequently, just as the historical and cultural contexts toward century's end are diffuse, when one really tries to understand the shaping literary influences—not to mention those of music, painting, sculpture, and, even, literary

theory—well, the anxiety of influence becomes more of a stressful tension on the tenuous claims of critics than a clear connective thread in the works of the writers.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the younger of the mid century generation entered its twilight, and the work of the poets born mid-century announced a diasporic rather than lineal legacy. To put it another way, in hindsight, much of the poetry of the mid-century and even into the sixties and seventies was written out of a reaction against Modernism. The “giants” still walked the earth, and their monoliths—from *The Waste Land* and *Spring and All* to *The Cantos* and *Trilogy*—loomed like challenging peaks; hence, for that generation of writers, models of influence and anxiety, the notion of precursors makes some sense—we see Lowell struggling with his two fathers, Eliot and Williams; we see Bishop trying to move away from Madame Marianne; Olson and Creeley extending the lineal experiments of Doc Williams; Ashbery pushing Stevens into and through a Hoonian box, and so on.

Of course, weaknesses with such generalizations hold true of any generation of writers (What of the effects of literary theory? Translation? The other arts?), but for contemporary American poetry at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the tendentiousness seems especially apparent. For example, think about a few of this century’s poetic lineages, isms, movements, and such: Eliotic, Poundian, Stevensian; Imagism, Objectivism, Projectivism, Confessionalism, and deep Imagism; the New Agrarians, the Black Mountain School, New York poets, San Francisco’s Renaissance, New Formalists, neo-Narrative Writers, and the Language poets—to name just a few. Now take a look at a specific poet; let’s say, Robert Hass. Hass has asserted that Pound and Wordsworth are formative poets for him—the Wordsworthian posture toward nature and the Poundian license of inclusion are certainly elements in his work. However, can one discount the influence of his famous formalist teacher Yvor Winters? Or of the Bay poets: Snyder, Rexroth, and Palmer (three very different threads)? Further, Hass’s grappling with translating Milosz and the haiku of Basho, Buson, and Issa has certainly shaped his poetics—not to mention his

familiarity with literary theory, his struggles understanding the writing of Rilke and Lowell, his interest in the relationship between the novel and middle-class consumption (the subject of his doctoral dissertation), his engagement with environmentalism, and even his taste for exotic cooking. And then, of course, what does one do with biographical facts? The historical and cultural clatter—from J. Lo's newest love interest, M.J.'s most recent comeback, and "The Weakest Link" to terrorist attacks, genome research, and AIDS pandemics in Africa?

Simply, as a tool for making generalizations about contemporary poets, the vortex of influence cycles out of control. Consequently, an interview with each writer is a valuable interstice through which to glimpse a writer's work and to begin to understand various perspectives on the century in which he or she began to write.

In this collection, I have chosen a list of poets that seem to me representative of a "range of what's possible" in contemporary American poetry. Borrowed from the interview with Brenda Hillman, my title phrase speaks to one of the primary strengths of American poetry, a strength that is directly connected to the multiple energies fueling the artistic practices. Again and again, these interviewees speak to a nonpartisan vibrancy, an enthusiastic call to the art that generously invites pluralistic traditions, numerous practices, multiple approaches; I find such expressions invigorating and encouraging.

In fact, if I were to identify recurring threads in my discussions with the writers, then one of the most significant is the emphasis on the need for variation in the art. From Addonizio to Wrigley, these writers emphasize again and again how sectarian divisions based on lines in the sand lead to little good for the art. "I don't approve of any restriction that would limit American poetries, especially when it involves throwing out other aesthetics," Edward Hirsch gently cautions. Many of his peers agree: writers who have studied beneath different teachers, championed radically alternative poetics, come from diverse backgrounds, and offered varying visions on the art, religion, and politics echo this same theme of inclusion.

Another repeated thread involves what might be called a meticulous devotion to craft. Recently, some poets and critics have described sloppiness in much of contemporary American poetry—a failure of form due to the loose boundaries of free verse. The writers with whom I spoke articulate a different reality. Whatever shape the poems ultimately take—from the more “mainstream” use of the line and page by a writer like Dave Smith to a radical use of space and margin by Brenda Hillman—these writers are devoted to meticulous shaping of the page. Further, although meter and traditional form may not be as prevalent in their practices, each of the poets articulated an intense fluency with such matters. As a side note to this observation, though, I should mention that even in the most “traditional” of the poets with whom I spoke, there was an awareness of the more experimental aspects of contemporary writing. Robert Wrigley, for example, may write in what appears to be a fairly “regular” line, but his emphasis on percussive musicality coupled to strong metaphoric imagery bespeaks an awareness of the most experimental and nonreferential work of his generation.

Yet another recurring thread—perhaps the most significant one—is what I might call a Shelleyan faith in the power of the art. Nearly all the writers in this collection speak passionately to the cultural importance of poetry, to *the need* for poetry. Cynics might decry such a refrain as an obvious outgrowth of the project; get a group of poets together and of course they’re going to talk about the importance of poetry! Perhaps. However, I’d like to think that this refrain speaks more to the poets’ attentive engagement with the political, social, cultural, and spiritual fabrics surrounding them, engagement that has given them hope that the art they create reaches ears that hear and eyes that see. “The generosity of these artistic practices broadens the available reality,” Claudia Keelan argues in regard to the artists who have affected her. The same is true of the musing, rumination, and speculation of the writers included herein: because their visions make us ask important questions about poetry, reexamine our thoughts on aesthetics, as well as consider the political, spiritual, and cultural contexts in which

we live, make us—how else to put it?—equally attentive and present, they have provided a generous gift. They show us that the range of the possible is boundless

—Tod Marshall, 2001

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RANGE OF THE POSSIBLE



PHOTO BY JEANNE C. FINLEY

Kim Addonizio was born in 1954 in Washington, D.C. Her three books of poetry articulate a unique vision rooted in stark worldliness yet driven by a lyrical desire to transcend this broken world. The Philosopher's Club, Jimmy & Rita, and Tell Me (a finalist for the 2000 National Book Award) also exhibit a dynamic formal range; from variations on the sonnet to a muscular free verse line, Addonizio's formal repertoire is flexible and wide ranging. A recipient of National Endowment for the Arts grants, as well as many other awards, she lives in the San Francisco Bay area and teaches in the low residency M.F.A. program at Goddard College.

KIM ADDONIZIO

Kim and I conducted this interview in the early fall 2001.

Many mid-century poets were shaped by Modernism; many contemporary poets reacted to the reaction of the mid-century poets. How did you come to poetry? How does it connect to your understanding of literary history in this century?

I have to say that I was shaped very haphazardly. My formal literary education was sketchy, so I have all the quirks and deficiencies of the autodidact. I started late—around twenty-seven, twenty-eight. I had no background in poetry, didn't read it until I found myself writing it. At that point I went to get a Master's in English/Creative Writing, but I wasn't particularly shaped by any historical period, I don't think. I managed to evade entirely a requirement for nineteenth-century literature, and had to catch up later, on my own. In graduate school I read the Modernists, some of whom I liked very much, some of whom I found merely interesting. The "Language" poets were dominating ideas of poetics at the time, and I was interested in those ideas, but as a poet, I found myself pursuing a kind of writing that was considered outdated and was certainly unfashionable. It was hard to find my own territory at first, but once I did, I pretty much lost interest in other people's definitions of poetry and pursued what compelled me. I'm not very cerebral; I mostly don't like academia and its categorizing. Theories

of language make me nauseous, though I'm aware that every writer still operates under some theory, whether consciously examined or not. But I think it goes deeper than language; what you think the projects of language and of poetry are have a lot to do with who you are in other ways.

Which of the Modernist poets did you like? Why?

Well, I read those poets fifteen to twenty years ago. I don't often go back to them, because I don't teach modern poetry classes or anything. I suppose that's a way of saying, I don't generally look to those writers for sustenance. Though sometimes I'll encounter a fragment of, say, Eliot's *Four Quartets* and like it a lot. And I think "Prufrock" is a great poem. I remember I liked Eliot in graduate school, and some of Stevens for the music of his language in poems like "Sunday Morning." My daughter had to read *The Waste Land* for high school a couple of years ago, and I kind of enjoyed rereading it after I went through the process of figuring it out again.

All of those wonderful notes. Tell me about some of the poets to whom you look for sustenance. Specific poets and even poems and why.

Right now I'm finding a lot of sustenance in Rumi. It's helpful to remember the eternal, when civilization seems so fragile—here we are at war again, and there are real dangers to our survival. There are certain Jack Gilbert poems that I love, poems like "Tear It Down," where he writes, "Love is not / enough. We die and are put into the earth forever. / We should insist while there is still time." When a student and friend of mine was dying, I read her Jack Gilbert's poems. They don't have any bullshit in them; they're full of the core issues of being human—love, loss, loneliness, how to live authentically. Then there are poets I go to for other reasons as well. C.K. Williams, say, whose syntax is ravishing and who captures the minute turnings of consciousness on the page. Neruda's love sonnets. Philip Larkin for his formal skills and that great edge of

bitterness. Merrill and Komunyakaa and others for sheer language. Elizabeth Bishop for her imagery. Whitman for his expansiveness and Dickinson for her depth. Donne and Herbert for their questioning and soul-searching. Keats I love going back to for companionship. I feel him so strongly through his work—that presence and imagination there on the page. I guess that's what draws me.

You said that "it was hard to find your own territory" but once you did, everything else seemed sort of inconsequential. How would you describe or define your poetics?

Here is what I believe, if this constitutes a poetics: I believe language was developed over millions of years as a way to communicate. Personally, I'm not interested in destroying meaning or multiplying it *ad infinitum*. I believe in narrative, in story. I believe in the lyric, that it is possible to sing. I believe that poetry is an act of consciousness and that most critics miss the point completely. And I'm a little tired of hearing how naïve that position is, and that poetry isn't self-expression. Of course it is! That doesn't negate its being an art and a craft. Artists create out of their ideas, their obsessions, their interests, their passions, their lived and imaginative experience. If that isn't self-expression, I don't know what else to call it. Art is a function of the human spirit. To play intellectual games with language is interesting, but it doesn't take you anywhere. I'm not saying that I feel writers shouldn't fracture meaning, but there are certain kinds of writing that seem to me a real dead end because the writers are operating completely from the intellect. That's a dead end. Then there's a writer like Anne Carson, for example, who is an interesting mix of what I'd call Modernist or Postmodernist techniques combined with some rather traditional emotional territory. That's a lot more appealing; it's not bloodless. I think poetry has to negotiate with the *duende*. Any poetry that does that I am happy to read, and I respect it, whether or not I understand it.