

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT HASS

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A major American poet and an exceptionally fine critic and essayist, Robert Hass is one of the most significant figures of contemporary literature. US Poet Laureate between 1995-97, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, and an extremely gifted translator of Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz and of Japanese poetry –*The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa* (1995)– his poetry defies easy classification.

Born in San Francisco in 1941, Hass established his reputation as a poet when he won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award with *Field Guide* (1973) a collection of poems that draws for inspiration on the Californian landscape and on his background in Eastern European studies. His next volume, *Praise*, won him the William Carlos Williams award in 1979. Even more critical acclaim was to follow with publication of his *7 Human Wishes* (1990), followed by *Sun under Wood* (1996). His most recent collection is *Time and Materials: Poems 1997 – 2005* (2007). His recurrent themes center on art, nature and man's relationship with the natural world, *eros* and desire, history and nostalgia. In many of his poems he pays tribute to poets and painters: Gerhard Richter, Vermeer, Milosz, Tranströmer, Horace, Whitman, Stevens, Nietzsche, Trakl, Goethe and Lucretius. His style ranges from haiku clarity to blank verse narratives; a brilliant longer poem is "English: An Ode," alternating lyrics and prose pieces. Haiku provides him with an extremely imagistic and emotional clarity while the longer poems pursue a kind of post-Enlightenment social critique.

His poems adopt an autobiographic confessional voice reminiscent of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, yet filtered through the prism of myth, touched by tenderness, while his public poems reflect on the vicissitudes of history with unusual moral force. Quite often, Hass inquires into the meaning of history, language and art. Central to his poetic is a romantic-modernist faith in imagination and in the

role of art as fundamental to existence and to the self's spiritual redemption. Many of his poems present an eco-critical awareness of the way in which man has ruthlessly exploited nature. He feels a kinship with nature, plants and animals, in sum, the great chain of being. Nature becomes linked to personal passions and respect for alterity.

**Viorica Patea: What does it mean for you to have been born in San Francisco? In what way has place influenced you? New England seems to be intrinsic to American poetry. Californian landscape, the feel of this land seems to be a very postmodern thing. In fact, California only enters American poetry late, in the 50s and 60s with the San Francisco Renaissance.**

**Robert Hass:** I imagine that the way place influences every writer in the deepest way is when he is unconscious of it. So I have no idea how place affects you, but I do think that growing up in a place gave me a subject or at least a taste of it. As a young man I was aware of Faulkner's Mississippi and of Robert Lowell's New England, later noticing that Frank O'Hara made New York City a subject in the way Baudelaire had made a subject of Paris. Coming from a place gives you a potential subject. Being from California has various implications; when I was a kid, all the textbooks were published on the East Coast, and in reading children's books, the kind of verse through which children learn to read, "see the dog runs," "see Jack and Jill," the setting was always New England or New York; the children went out to play in the snow dressed in snow clothes, they bounced up and down in piles of colorful leaves in the fall, there were red birds, green fields and it looked nothing like my landscape. I assumed that's how the world was supposed to look, and it was not represented in the culture that surrounded me. This is another way in which place gave me a subject: naming the trees and the land, the birds, the animals and the plants, I felt I was carrying them over from the new realm of my experience into this magical realm of literature.

Another part of this is that California's landscape has been violently transformed for economic reasons; half the state has a Mediterranean climate which is extremely dry, the northern half of the state is wet and rainy, so half the state has no water and the other half has lots of it, and the engineering and the transformation of the landscape from the 1930s to 1960s was very intensive. It is

probably true that since the 1950s, every child in the world, in Spain, in Romania, in China, in India has experienced the transformation of the natural places they knew in their childhood. This is not unique to California, yet it is part of my experience that, just as my world wasn't represented, it was also disappearing. That also gave me a subject I was starting to write in the 1960s, which was about the moment in which the world became aware of the ecological crisis. Until about 1965 in all literature nature was the permanent dependable beautiful backdrop against which all these human dramas played out. By about 1965 everybody on the planet suddenly realized that that bird singing up there belonged to a species that might be disappearing, that they were not more permanent but perhaps less permanent than us. This awareness changed everyone's relationship to nature and to the idea of writing about place. Finally, San Francisco is to me a remarkably beautiful city. There is a fairly strong anti-urban prejudice in Anglo-American writing and it got picked up by the American Romantic writing of Thoreau or Emerson. Growing up on a country estate in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson didn't like cities. He saw more than 18 houses together for the first time when he went to Paris, a vast city. In the early days in America, the boats from London sailed right up the rivers and unloaded their spinets and harpsichords and fine furniture right on the docks of these big slave owning estates. My impression is that the European idea was always that fortified and beautiful city on the hill. Since the Renaissance the idea of the city was at the core of European civilization. So, growing up in San Francisco, which was a partly Italian, partly Irish, and partly Spanish or Mexican city, I think I did not inherit the anti-urban prejudice at the same time that I inherited an intense love of the natural world.

**VP: You said: "Californian landscape shows up so much in these poems because it was a subject given to me and because I had, [...] a passion for natural history, but also because it was a place for me where language did not belong altogether to desire, to human intention."**

**RH:** As I grew up I read the Californian writers, Robinson Jeffers, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and then the Beats when they came along. Although when I first read Allen Ginsberg, when I was in high-school, I read the beginning of *Howl*; it was completely incomprehensible to me. He was writing out of a kind of surreal

version of East Coast ashcan realism, intensely urban, which didn't connect to my life and my world at all. His lines "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/ dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,/ angel-headed hipsters" and so on and so on, was not my world. I thought of the energy and excitement of it, but when I read Gary Snyder "down valley a smoke haze/ Three days heat, after five days rain/ Pitch glows on the fir-cones/ Across rocks and meadows/ Swarms of new flies."<sup>1</sup> I thought ah, I know that, I know that. So anyway, the West Coast writers were a gift for me. In the same way, my friend Robert Pinsky grew up in New Jersey and he read William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg and the poets of his place for the same reason I was reading the poets of mine. Long answer it turns out.

**VP: I would like to invite you to say more on the relationship between names and places? What is this relationship between names of places in California that sound so Spanish, so foreign to the Anglo- American world, it is like living in places whose names no longer have meaning for some. And I am saying that because very much of your work tries to retrieve the original meaning of a place and to give meaning to it, instead of living in a place that has a blind name.**

**RH:** Well, that may be something postmodern about California. I grew up in San Francisco or San Rafael, the town named for the archangel, two places in which the Yankees had driven out the Mexican Californios. It is interesting to talk about this for an imaginary Spanish audience. I imagine Cortez landing in what became Vera Cruz and then make his way across and then those Franciscan missionaries making their way out into California naming the principal highways through this land, the Camino Real, and naming all the cities after their patron saints. San Francisco was militarily the farthest outpost of the Spanish empire and then of the Mexican empire. After the Gold rush, California, the northernmost fringe of the Spanish empire, was very thinly settled. The ranchers made their living here by raising beef and selling coal to sailing ships from Europe that wanted to replenish their stocks in the harbor at San Francisco. And it was ripe for the picking because it wasn't

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<sup>1</sup> This is an allusion to Gary Snyder's poem "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout," *Riprap*.

settled intensively and when it was settled it was on the Spanish hacienda model, in which there were large tracts of land. Moreover, the Spanish idea, unlike the American idea was to try to train local peoples to produce the European economy, whereas the Yankee idea had been basically to drive out, exterminate or put into reservations the peoples of those places.

**VP: In what way did this affect the destiny of the native populations?**

**RH:** A third of all distinct Native American languages were in California, and for some reason, in isolated little tribes and valleys there were peoples and languages as different from one another as Basque and Chinese. These isolated little pockets of people were much more violently affected by the plagues brought by European diseases and so between 1833 and 53, before the Yankees even arrived, diseases contracted from Europeans had killed all of two thirds of the Californians.

**VP: I would like to ask you to tell us something about your Californian childhood. You have written about it in *Sun under Wood*, a book of poems composed in the vein of Lowell's *Life Studies*, yet filtered through a mythical lens. While Lowell's poems are metonymic, yours are metaphoric.**

**RH:** I was born in San Francisco and lived in my grandfather's house. I was born in March of 1941, and when I was nine months old, my parents were at the beach looking at the Pacific in winter, when they got the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. My grandfather's house was two blocks from the Presidio, which was the place from where the Pacific war was launched and my father and mother divided my grandfather's large house into two apartments, one for us and a grander apartment, which they rented to generals from the Presidio. I lived in this apartment together with my parents and brothers, my grandmother and grandfather, and my aunt. Among my earliest memories were these black limousines pulling up in front of our house, and the general, whose little girl I had my earliest crush on, would come out of the car driven by his aide from the military post. My mother's younger sister got engaged to a fighter pilot who was fighting in the Pacific and who came home on leave from the war, dressed in his military uniform, and my brother and I hid under the piano, while my mother played the piano, and people had these 1940 cocktail parties. I remember the foghorns, the fog off

the bay, the blue sky; when the sky was clear, you could even hear seals barking sometimes from the roof of our house. I remember the war.

Later we moved to what was then the country; it was a typical move to the suburbs, to the little town of San Rafael, the last of the San Francisco missions, when I was six or seven. I grew up in that small town. My father was a business man, he did tax law for a big insurance corporation, and my mother stayed home and took care of the children. I had a brother, four years older and a sister, three years younger, and, a few years later, another younger brother. I went to the local Catholic school, Saint Rafael's school, where the mission was and where the hospital had been founded in order to treat all the Indians who would then be killed off by European diseases. Those are the rough circumstances of my childhood.

**VP: When did you write poems for the first time? How come you decided to become a poet? How did you know you were going to be a poet?**

**RH:** I think I wrote poems as soon as I heard poems, I don't remember exactly when, but I think that by third or fourth grade, I was writing rhymed things about my classmates. My parents subscribed to several magazines that came in the mail and they had a page of jokes and light verse, and my brother and I were always writing, trying to write funny poems, which we sent to this magazine to get them published. I was ten to twelve years old. We were submitting our little poems in pencil except that we never heard back from the magazines. Neither of my parents read poetry. My grandmother, my mother's mother, who was Irish, knew a lot of poetry by heart and could recite it. So, poetry was always around and in high-school I started hearing about the Beats who made poetry seem very interesting. In college I tried to write essays, and I fell in love with the essays of James Baldwin, the African American writer of the civil rights era. I remember I read his essay on Albert Camus with great excitement. I also got interested in Normal Mailer who was also writing interesting essays. In college I vaguely wanted to be a writer and I tried various genres. It seemed to me I could be a playwright or try to write for the movies, a poet, or a fiction writer and an essayist. I had two or three friends who said they were poets and intended to become poets, but I didn't. In fact, when I would submit poems to the lyric magazines at my college Saint Mary's, the editor would always tell me to stick to fiction, and it wasn't until I

was in my mid twenties that I found myself reading contemporary poetry with enormous excitement and I tried to write it. I never said to myself, "I am going to be a poet." I would read poetry and then I would find stuff happening in my head, and then I would come home and write it down.

**VP: How do you write? When do you write? Osip Mandelstam used to compose his poems aloud and he had to be alone to do so. How would you describe the creative process of composition? Would you agree with Wordsworth's definition of the creative process as "emotions recollected in tranquility."**

**RH:** No, I wouldn't at all. I believe that was true for him, but it is certainly not true for me. In Wordsworth's own writing, it is pretty clear that some of the emotions are not remembered emotions from previous experience, but imagined emotions happening inside the process of the poem, which, I guess, is actually typical of poets, and probably also musicians, composers, artists. We do not quite own the emotions that the poems produce, but the situation of the poem, I think, that memory is what produces the poem. Everybody has their store of emotion and their – I do not know what the musical term for this is – their typical tonic figure, that is, one person's typical figure might be an expansive elation, another's might be bitter sarcasm, and another's might be sweet anticipation. Right now this is a hard question for me to answer because for a week this summer, I had nothing else to do but write poetry, I went away, I got up early and wrote first drafts in great bursts. I had not written a word of poetry before or after that for a while, so I have no idea how I write; I don't know how you turn the machine on, if you do. First of all, because I write prose and I translate, and do other things, I am doing something every day; during the periods when I am actively working on poetry, when that's my main job, I almost never start with a blank page, because I always have a desk full of notes, fragments, and bits of music, and bits of ideas.

**VP: Do you also use older verse, poems, lines which you wrote some time ago and which you recycle into new poems?**

**RH:** Yes, I have a file I call "finished but not very good," poems that look to me when I am through with them like the thousands of poems in American literary magazines that add nothing to the sounds being made, and then I have a lot of compost of things begun, that did not work out, things I started, ideas, lines, I mean,

that is almost always where I go first. The fragments might be old but they are not old yet, because they found their way into poems and since they found their way into poems they're new.

**VP: Do you revise your poems a lot?**

**RH:** Someone told me Robert Duncan gave a lecture the other night and he said he never revised a poem. He has a very great, very complicated poem called "My Mother Would be a Falconess" and it is a kind of mythical poem about imagining himself as a falcon who has been released by his mother to hunt, to taste the blood, but must always return to her. The poem is written in a rich complex style, and while he was ranting about what a terrible idea revision was, I asked him if he had revised "My Mother Would be a Falconess." He denied it, and when I asked him how long it took him to write it, he replied "about eighteen months."

**VP: You said in *Field Guide*: "My masters were the poets I read." Who are the most important poets in your life whom you love and cherish?**

**RH:** If I did it in temporal order, I would say, the first poet that I loved was Wordsworth. When I was a child, my older brother read a line from "Tintern Abbey," at the beginning of the poem he is remembering a landscape and he says "Once again I see/ These hedgerows, hardly hedgerows, little lines/ Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,/ Green to the very door." And when he revised the poem: "Once again I see/ These hedgerows, hardly hedgerows, little lines/ Of sportive wood run wild," it knocked me out. I did not know you could do that. So, I think that was one of the first sounds of poetry that I fell in love with and identified with the poet. There was a Wallace Stevens poem that I read and loved, but I was so young, I didn't even look at the name of the poet; years later, I realized that the poem was by Wallace Stevens. So he could have been the first. I think that John Donne could have been the second. In college they were gorgeous to me. Reading these poems felt as if a spoken voice, a human being grabbed you by the arm, talked to you, saying: "for God's sake hold your tongue and let me love." An early poet whom I loved was Theodore Roethke; when I started reading contemporary poetry, I came across an anthology and his poem, "The Lost Son." Then I read T.S. Eliot about the same time, I think I must have come across "Prufrock," which is a poem every American kid studying poetry falls in love with. *The Waste Land* would have been



too hard for me at that time. It is interesting thinking about it now, that in all the examples I have given you, what I fell in love with was the sound of the spoken voice. Another poet I loved in college was Gerard Manley Hopkins whose poems I found very beautiful. As I grew older I became fascinated by the Beat generation poets, especially, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, and Allen Ginsberg. In my early twenties, when I was actually starting to write poetry, there was a whole range of poets of that generation whom I discovered, particularly Frank O'Hara, Denise Levertov, whom I met and who became an important mentor for me. Suddenly I was aware of this whole range of very interesting poets: W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, John Ashbery, right around the same time that I was beginning to read about politics, because of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, and that was all one excitement for me. In later years, the poets I worked on a lot, that I have come to love, are Thomas Tranströmer, Czeslaw Milosz; the three Japanese haiku poets I have translated, Basho, Buson and Issa; George Oppen; the poets of my place here. I have come to love my wife Brenda Hillman's poetry, and that of my friend Michael Palmer means a lot to me, too.

**VP: Let me ask you one of these big questions: what does poetry mean to you?**

**RH:** I don't know if I can answer that, but I can answer it historically. It has to do with that Wallace Stevens's poem that I didn't know was by Wallace Stevens, called "Domination of Black." I wrote an essay about that poem. I grew up in a family that has lots of alcoholism, addiction problems. In my small family, my mother had a really terrible drinking problem. In a family where there is a lot of addiction and denial, the general principle is never to tell the truth about anything, you never want to get pinned down with the idea that it is Wednesday, or the sun is out, anything. So, when I first read poetry it did not hit me for the delightful wit and cleverness of play, but when it seemed true. I felt like I was hearing somebody tell the truth for the first time, and it wasn't about anything, "it was the cry of the peacock," it was about a feeling of awe and unease. I think that was the original feeling about poetry for me, that power of being able to say something in a way that was true. Later, of course, I read Heidegger on poetry, of whom my friend Czeslaw Milosz said to me "one should be always suspicious of Heidegger," but his idea that poetry "called the world into being" rang true for me.

**VP: In “Santa Lucia” you say aesthetics comes down to “Love & Art.” Would this be a good definition of your poetics?**

**RH:** Freud said that the healthy person could love and work, and if art is your work, then love and art is not a bad way of describing it. In the kinds of categorizing aesthetics that aestheticians and philosophers and critics do, like Charlie Altieri, I suppose, I operate like many writers of my generation on a kind of cusp between late modernism and postmodernism. I think my earliest roots are in romantic poetry, in Whitman and Wordsworth. Not that I intend to compare myself to the really great artists, but if you asked, for example, what is Cezanne’s aesthetic, what would you say? It’s fidelity to really seeing. I had a friend, an old art historian, who was from the German Bauhaus and escaped the Nazis. He taught in Berkeley these last years, and I tried to impress him by going on yammering about Cézanne and, one day, after lunch, he took me over to the art department, and we went into a studio where he put a canvas in front of me and took four greens from the acrylics and put them out on the table and said “put these next to each other, so that they shimmer, and until you’ve figured out how to do that shut up about Cézanne.” I think my aesthetic consists in putting this word next to this word until they shimmer, but how you do that is another thing. I mean there are aesthetic principles, like you can say Whitman’s aesthetic, at least, has to do with abundance and variety, and that’s how he thinks of nature, and if I were to find a phrase for Cesar Vallejo’s aesthetics, I would say, “brokenness and hurt and truth and sweetness.”

**VP: Which would be your letter to a young poet?**

**RH:** You know, because of the internet, I get letters from young poets all the time and there are so many of this kind, and when they send poems they want different things, like the young man who wrote to Rilke and what he partly wanted was praise for his work and what he got instead was what Rilke needed to say. I think what I usually say to young poets is that you have to read, that’s how you find your way into your art, and that if you read passionately, you will be led from one poet to another. Roethke wrote “I take this cadence from a man named Yeats/ I take it and I give it back again:/For other tunes and other wanton beats/ Have tossed my heart and fiddled through my brain./ Yes, I was dancing mad,

and how/That came to be the bears and Yeats would know.”<sup>2</sup> Then I went to Yeats and then Yeats sent me to another poet. That’s how you read: you read and take the things you love. That’s the first thing I would say to poets. And then, the other thing is, my experience says that people who become poets, whether they become very good poets or not, do it because they persist, and they persist because they can stand how bad their writing is, they can overcome self-loathing and keep going. I was just reading an essay in *The New Yorker* by David Remnick the other day about Bruce Springsteen and he was saying that he thought that the fundamental energy for all artists was to escape from self-loathing. I am certainly full of enough self-discomfort that I recognize that. Being able to tolerate that in order to get at what is true for you is maybe one of the sharpest places between late Modernism and Postmodernism; between the notion that you are trying to make or find something that is true for you and the idea that there is nothing in particular that is true for you, there are only inventions and you have to make your inventions to find out what is interesting for you. Wallace Stevens said “happens to like is one /Of the ways things happen to fall”<sup>3</sup> and that notion of poetry as pure invention comes from that, I think.

**VP: You are one of the few American poets for whom East European countries matter, who has also been aware of the tragic history behind the iron curtain, and who mentions the Gulag among the “terrors of history” of the twentieth century. Many of your poems are on history: “Between Wars – Poland 1922,” “Dawn Freedom,” “Bush’s War,” “The History of the Place,” “California,” “Of the Nation,” “Europe.” You also write about American history, the rape of the land and anti-heroes like Kit Carson. In “Palo Alto: The Marshes,” a poem about American history, you describe the burning down of Indian villages in California, and you say “Citizens are rising/ to murder in their moral dreams.” Do you think a poet’s duty is to bear witness to his time?**

**RH:** I don’t think so. I think that a poet’s duty is to go where his or her art takes him or her, and for some poets that would be towards a poetry of witness but for others it wouldn’t at all. I think that there are poets for whom history just isn’t very important and

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<sup>2</sup> An allusion to “Four for Sir John Davies,” ll. 19-24.

<sup>3</sup> “Table Talk” (1935)

there are poets who, like Wallace Stevens, explicitly reject the idea of history and who say in their poems that history only exists in our heads. I make the argument for the way in which that's not true, because all trace of nemesis and all the kharmic violence gathering around the history of human behaviors, of course, affects us. Stevens says in his poem, "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," referring to the place in Pennsylvania where his German ancestors were born and buried, that they're dead and gone. Basically, the poem says that they had their moment to dance in the sun, yet now, this is my moment to dance in the sun and they don't exist anymore.

**VP: However, history is not only the past; it is also the present and you have taken an active public and social stance on many issues, so you haven't been so disengaged from history either.**

**RH:** There are a couple of reasons why I haven't been and we've already talked about it in a way. We were talking earlier about California place and place names. During the Vietnam War when I was coming to adult consciousness and we were carpet bombing these peasant villages in the rainforest, I was living in a place where the real estate developers were giving Spanish names to places that they had no idea of nor feeling for. One of the two highest mountains, invisible from this part of California, Mount Diablo, named by the Spanish missions, is apparently in Midwok, an Indian name, When they started to create a new subdivision in that part of town called Walnut Creek in English, they decided to call the subdivision Saint Diablo, canonizing the devil to make it euphonious. There is another little area, "Carril Mariposa," which is nonsensical when translated into English, meaning "Butterfly Wheeltracks." There is a street near the college where I taught, called Camino Avenue, because the word "camino" had floated so free as a colorful sounding Spanish word, they didn't realize that they were naming it "Camino Camino." So, the not knowing history, living so lightly on the land with such ignorance of the history of our relationship to it, felt to me like an aspect of American arrogance and violence. This has been sometimes an important subject for me.

**VP: I would like to ask you something about Czeslaw Milosz. What is the imprint he has left on you? What does he mean to you? What is the most important thing he taught you and us?**

**RH:** We were friends and collaborators on the English side of his poetry for twenty years and it really is hard for me to even say what's true. A friend of mine bought Czeslaw's house after his death, and for years couldn't bear to clean out a couple of the closets. When he finally did, there were old knit ties, tweed jackets, tweed caps. The moths had got some of them, so when you asked that question, the first thing I thought of was Czeslaw's tweed caps, I just miss them and I miss them as a person, and I think about him a lot, in many, many different contexts.

I was reading Zizek on violence recently and I thought, this is exactly what Czeslaw hated, if there was anything he was against, it was a glib Nietzschean celebration of revolutionary violence. I do not know the man but I think he is a showman who walks in dangerous areas. In the last section of Milosz's poem "A Treatise on Poetry," after the destruction of Warsaw, the narrator is in a rowboat in Pennsylvania waiting to see a mythological creature from his Polish childhood books, an American beaver. While he is sitting there he thinks, he doesn't have to be an Eastern European poet, he could be an American poet, and then he could only write about sex and death and have no other subjects, and he experiences this moment of dreaming, of escaping into an ahistorical landscape. What struck Milosz was the ahistorical landscape of American poetry. So, as soon as I start thinking about that subject, I think about what Czeslaw had to say about it. If I start thinking about the land in California, because he had this as a subject for twenty or thirty years, I think about what Czeslaw had to say about it. I think about the way in which he felt that there was a tradition of pure poetry of Paul Valéry, that he acknowledged was pure and more beautiful, and that his generation of poets, including Octavio Paz, was going to be stuck with having to confront history and their poetry was not going to be pretty. Almost anywhere I turn, sometimes I find myself struggling against his anthems, sometimes sharing them, but he is pretty constantly on my mind.

**VP:** Many of your poems in *Time and Materials* are homages to Milosz. "Czeslaw Milosz In memoriam" is a series of haikus on paintings by Klimt, Salvador Rosa, Edward Hopper.

**RH:** Those are poems of Czeslaw's. They're translations we collaborated on together. I didn't write them, they are not my poems, they are his poems. And I included in the book three to four translations of Thomas Tranströmer, there is a Georg Trakl

translation, but they are partly there because I wanted to tell the story about the translation.

**VP: You, like Milosz and Seamus Heaney were born Catholic and then you, unlike them, became attracted by Buddhism. What could you tell us about your beliefs?**

**RH:** I have written a couple of essays about this and I am at the moment two weeks overdue for an essay on Milosz and belief. I loved growing up inside the Roman Catholic church in the Bay area and I loved the nuns; they were kind and loving. I loved the rituals, I loved the liturgy of the seasons, I loved my first communion, though I had to repress the knowledge that it was a quite disappointing experience, but I loved dressing in white pants and a white shirt, I loved the palms on Palm Sunday, I was an altar boy; I felt the awe when they put purple sacks over the saints' statues in church and I loved all that ceremonial stuff about the church. What I didn't like about it was something else. In California the children all went to school together during the week and wore uniforms; on Sunday all the families went to Sunday Mass because otherwise you went to hell. The happy well scrubbed families in their beautiful clothes would show up for Sunday Mass with the not so happy scruffier families, and you could tell that the rich and the pretty were the most virtuous and I hated it, I felt that I disliked and resented it.

**VP: But I am not referring to the institution as such but to your beliefs.**

**RH:** I came to share the beliefs of my time; somewhere between my readings in physics and my readings in astronomy, and my readings in biology, I came to see that there was no particular reason to assume a creator God, some Aquinas first mover God that didn't seem to me any longer necessary. I read Joyce, Camus, Sartre, Stevens, Eliot and Williams, I fell into the thinking of my time. Slowly my relationship to the church deteriorated, I rebelled against the sexual teachings of the Catholic church, which didn't make sense to me. The whole superstructure fell away but not the desire to have a spiritual life. I was no longer interested in religion because none of the available religions were interesting to me and by the time I found my way into Buddhist communities, I also discovered that they were religious and I wasn't that much interested in them. At that point in my life I was not interested in belonging to a community of believers, having practices together or sharing the belief in some idea of the

sacred. I guess if you said religion is a community engaged in shared behavior around ideas of the sacred, I don't belong to a religion anymore. If you said spirituality has to do with the soul's relation to its own meaning, I was interested in that and the place I found that was art. In so far as I have a religious practice and a spiritual practice it has to do with the study of literature and the practice of art. The way to connect to a spiritual tradition that is not a theistic tradition was Buddhism. And of course, it was available to me through the Californian poets Gary Snyder, through the late poems of Kenneth Rexroth. Early on I read an essay by Gary Snyder called "Buddhist Anarchism" in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's magazine called the *The Journal for the Protection of all Beings*. And I thought, I did not know what either Buddhism or Anarchism were, and that got me started reading. And so finding my way to Buddhist thought, though I have never been much good at Buddhist practice, was a way of giving me a way of thinking and talking about spiritual life that was also an art practice.

**VP: You said what interests you in Milosz is "what drove him to a philosophic theological dualism." You frequently use the terms dualism and monism. You refer to Milosz as a dualist. Are you a monist or a dualist?**

**RH:** Well, I think I am a monist.

**VP: What does that mean?**

**RH:** I use those terms thinking back to the beginnings of the development of Christian thought, that is, Gnosticism is a dualism and the Gnostic myth, which is very close to the version of the Christian one, claims that there are two contrary principles in the universe, one of them is embodied in matter and the other is not, it is embodied in light, and their idea of the soul is that it is that spark of spirit that got trapped in the clay of matter. Czeslaw has written a whole book on this subject, *The Land of Ulro*; he was committed to that notion. He thought that what gives rise to dualism is the possibility of a monotheist explanation of evil, that is, to say this universe was created by a good God who loves us all and cares for all individual souls, which was impossible to reconcile with the history of the world, with its violence and cruelty. So there is a whole train of thinkers, not only Mani and the Manicheans, but it goes up to visionary poets like William Blake or Swedenborg, a tradition Czeslaw was attracted to, who believe that this physical universe

with its natural laws in its full chain was cruel and grotesque and there had to be some place else, there had to be something else, an escape from the world of matter. That's what I mean by dualism: the sense that there is another spiritual realm that is not of this universe as we experience it. No, I am not a dualist, I don't think there is some place else.

**VP: In your poem "Interrupted Meditation," Janos, a poetic character, says "we are not put on earth [...] to express ourselves" and then an old man in the poem says "there is silence at the end,/ and it doesn't explain, it doesn't even ask." And I would like to ask you why do you think we were put on earth?**

**RH:** To express ourselves. To be kind to each other, to meet each other.

**VP: In your poem titled "A Swarm of Dawn" you say: "There is a lot to be written in the Book of Errors." What is there to be written in the Book of Errors?**

**RH:** It is a way of saying everything interesting happens by mistake.

**VP: "On the Coast to Sausalito," a poem, that begins "I won't say much for the sea,/ except that it was, almost,/ the color of sour milk" which most critics compare with Gary Snyder but which reminds me of Eliot's "I do not know much about the river, the river is a brown God" in *The Four Quartets*. You describe an encounter with an atavistic fish. The lyrical I identifies with him and lets him live. The poem ends with the poetic persona's awareness of alterity: "creature and creature, we stared down centuries." Many of your poems have an ecological concern and awe for the other, whether animal, plant or man. How important is ecological awareness for you?**

**RH:** That poem I think is maybe the first poem I ever wrote that I felt was a real poem, and I had no doubt read *The Four Quartets* by that time. In retrospect, one's early poems are so full of echoes of other poets, there's hardly a word that's yours in them. I was trying to figure out how to write free verse, how many words in a phrase, how many pauses. At that point, I was trying to convey the beauty, the wildness and the otherness of that creature. What interested me in it was that, as usual, two different things split down



to one path. This path does not have to do with ecology, but with the encounter between two different kinds of creatures or my encounter or the speaker in the poem's encounter with a creature who is finally unknowable, but to whom he feels a connection, we're both creatures, we are both staring down centuries. You could argue, the rational part of my mind would argue, you have no idea whether a sculpin like that stares down centuries, in fact it probably doesn't. You, a human being, with a human kind of memory stare down centuries, but what I was trying to convey is the speaker's sense of wonder at the evolutionary roots of all creatures. E.O Wilson, the American environmentalist and entomological scientist, said that every creature has its own sensory world, that finally the experience of our dogs and our cats and the trees in our yards, and of the fish that we catch are unknowable to us, there are permanent mysteries that we live among and are available to us and to try to get near them is one of the tasks of our art. There's that side and that does not have to do with my notion of ecology, which is the science of the flow of energy among interrelated organisms. The study of ecology became important to me as I tried to learn about how nature works, what it is, and what the things that I have taken from it are. Inside ecology there are two fundamentally different schools thinking about this set of issues and they are a bit like the debate with Janus. In one set of ideas, there is a kind of natural order and a natural equilibrium inside ecological systems. That view was opposed in the early nineteen-twenties by the theory that said nature is not a circle, it's a linear process and the idea that they acquire natural balance is a sentimental human projection on these facts. In other words, that's the voice that says there's nothing but silence in the end.

**VP: Do your poems struggle with the unsayable? Do your poems gravitate towards the sublime, some luminous epiphanic moment? Do you in your poems try to express feelings that we have no words for?**

**RH.** Sure, all poems do. I have had an ongoing conversation with my colleague and friend, Lyn Hejinian, about this, and, like many of the Language poets, she has taken the position that there is no thought nor feeling outside of language, that it exists in language, and that even the unsayable exists as a notion because it is sayable.

**VP: But a child doesn't have language, and he still has feelings.**

**RH:** I have all kinds of feelings and experiences and clusters of thought-feeling that I don't have words for. As I was driving up and down Cedar Street looking for you, further up the street lived a friend of mine who killed herself a few years ago, and I think the first time I went to visit her at her house, I also got lost and had brought the wrong address. I found myself repeating this experience today, and yesterday I took my grandson and my daughter to the airport to send them away from us. So, emotionally, I am just on the edge of grief, plus my anger at myself for being so perpetually disorganized that I didn't bring the address. This is not a poem but it is a territory of experience that feels like it's all one thing that I do not have language for. The other kind of argument that you would make is that poetry is pure invention; it does not try to represent experience but to invent in language some entirely new set of possibilities. That has not basically been my mode, my mode has been wrestling with the unsayable. At the same time there has been among the Language poets, and in general in the postmodern critique of lyric poetry, a lot of suspicion about the epiphanic moment in poetry, which I find to be very healthy. I was talking to a very distinguished elder poet in a European country, and another person came up to us who had been married to a quite famous and popular poet. She was talking to my friend about how wonderful the internet was and how it was going to really abolish literature because now everybody could find their own way to self-expression and it was completely democratized. She went away, and I said, "that was So-and-so's wife?" And my friend said, "yes, and he wrote six hundred pages of poems, each of which ends in an epiphany of wisdom and he married that idiot." I think the gesture of epiphany, which is a bit the gesture of modernism really, is to be distrusted and the place for the interrogation of this distrust is poetry.

**VP: You say in *Praise*: "what is not there / is there, isn't it, the huge/ Bird of the first light/ Arched above the first waters/ Beyond out touching or intention/ Or the reasonable shore." Do your poems mediate between life and the transcendent, the visible and the invisible?**

**RH:** I think they do but not as much as they should. I think that if I have maybe ten years left to write, if I am as lucky as Czeslaw twenty years, this will be my job from now on. There are other things poetry can do, but yes, I guess that's the Dantesque task of poetry and other poets can do it in other ways. That figure for

me, the “huge bird of the first light” seems like a territory I haven’t explored very much in my poetry and that I probably should if I knew how.

**VP: In your poem, “white of forgetfulness, /White of safety,” whose title is a quotation from Louis Glück’s “The Wanderer” you say: “A line is a distance between two points. A point is indivisible. Not a statement of fact; a definition.”**

**RH:** That is a good transition. The point is like the first bird, it’s there in the imagination, it produces the orders in which we think, and you could say that the orders are entirely imaginary but they put objects on the moon and whole buildings and structures.

**VP: There is also something essentially mysterious in the line between the two points. It is very much like Frost’s “Birches” swinging back and forth between heaven and earth.**

**RH:** Yes, exactly.

**VP: What does translation mean to you? Do you think a poem can be translated? What is your attitude towards the primary text, since you are a great poet who has also done lots of translations? Your translations are very respectful to the original poem. It is a different kind of translation than Pound’s. Not that Pound was disrespectful but I think he simply created another poem. And translations are always very difficult. It is hard to remain faithful to the original, you are never faithful to the original although you would like to be.**

**RH:** My attitude towards translation is that you can’t get everything and you try to get what you want to bring across. Why bother to translate this person at all? Or this poem, at all? The reason that you want to translate them is what you need to bring over. You think, I want to bring this poem over into English because it is the most beautiful poem in Italian, but in fact it is impossible; the famous example is Cavalcanti’s “*donna mi prego*.” So many people have done translations of it and the rhyme is so intricate that you can’t do it, thus Pound decided that he was going to be interested in the philosophical neo-Platonism in the poem, so he translated that. When I was studying German in college, I had four years of Latin in high-school, and I think I only remembered two or three lines of poetry from those years of grubby schoolboy diligence. Early on I read a poem by Rilke called “Initiation” and he says in the

poem, “whoever you are,” as if instructions for young poets were important, “go outside your house and with your eyes raise a tree on the horizon” and he says, “und hatte die Welt gemacht,” “and you’ve made the world.” And I felt like I was struck by lightning. And saying in English, “and you’ve made the world,” it is not “und hatte die Welt gemacht.” It just doesn’t have those “tee” sounds, so can you ever translate it? I can’t, not into English, you cannot reproduce the sound, and if I did reproduce the sound I could not reproduce the idea, so you have to choose in translation. And then there is the other kind of poem, and I have written the other kind of poem, the one in which you take off from an original and make your own poem, but in translation. There is a poem of Pasternak’s in *My Sister Life*, I think it is the last poem in the book, and the last line is “and it rained collar studs for centuries.” And a friend of mine sent me his translation that he’d done with a Ukrainian poet living in New York, and I turned to that poem because I knew it, and he said “and for centuries it rained cuff links,” and I wrote to him and said “cuff links”? How could you say he said cuff links? And, he said, I didn’t think Americans would know what collar studs were, but they’d know what cuff links were, and I wrote back and said: “but the throat is not the wrist.” So my idea of translation is that you don’t go that far away from the original. It is fun to talk about translation because it is the little endless details of the examples that are interesting. Furthermore, translation for one thing is the *best* way to study poetry. Translation is studying, it is reading, first of all. It is more reading than writing, because either some great solution occurs to you or you just struggle with doing the best you can. Richard Wilbur who is a brilliant translator, a very fluent rhymer, said translation is more like doing crossword puzzles than it is like doing original creation. That seemed true to me, mostly, though sometimes when I would translate haiku, I would just suddenly find a phrasing and it felt like I had made a really cool poem in English, but mostly you just do the best you can.

**VP: How would you position your generation and your work in the American tradition? You have translated haiku, and I think this comes from your modernist inheritance.**

**RH:** Yea, that’s true. I think, this is regionally complicated for poets of my generation, because, say, Southern poets have had a somewhat different culture than the American South, African American poets had their own relationship to those lineages, but

almost all poets of my generation began with modernism, within which there is a considerable range of poetics, and then, in one form or another, they were influenced by the postwar generations, by the New York School, by the Black Mountain, by the Beats, the Deep Image poets, and some of them were in romantic rebellion against modernism, and others were an extension of modernism towards more perceptual and analytic modes of poetry. Thus, Language poetry, for example, took the analytical approach while other poets tried to take modernist impersonality and make it more personal and expressive, as the basic tool. If we go back to invention and memory, “the first bird and the first light,” I think this is true in all of the poetries of the world right now that poetry, the arts in general, were created since the 1850s by a middle class that had access to education but not to power, and had been cut off from traditional sources of religious belief and had turned to art to invent a future of unnamed religions, unnamed practices, spirituality in a world in which we live together and can have a conversation about the appalling violence of the world we live in. And that’s also one of the reasons for translation, why some young poet in China like some Xi Chuan is studying Tranströmer’s metaphors because if he wanted to taste what loneliness was, that’s where you could taste it. The other Chinese poet whose work I’ve got to know is Yu Jian whose parents were school teachers who got sent to the countryside for re-education during the Red Guard period because they were charged with bourgeois tendencies. Yu Jian stayed behind and couldn’t go to school because his parents had no party connections, so he went to work in a factory and found his way to the library and found Chinese translations of Walt Whitman, so out of not going to school he got his formation as a poet during this period of terrific turbulence by reading Whitman. All stories like this are incredibly moving to me because, who knows what some kid in Barcelona is going to do while stumbling across a book of poems by T.S. Eliot? What future they’re going to make out of their experience, or if some kid in India got to stumble across an Australian poet writing...

**VP: Yes because in fact literature touches your soul, your heart, your destiny.**

**RH:** And that’s the other thing about Czeslaw, he never doubted that he had that thing. This was a great conversation and one worth having.