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Interview with Daniel R. Schwarz

by Helen Maxson

Note: Poems referred to below that are not in this issue or prior issues of Westview have been published elsewhere, and most are accessible on Daniel R. Schwarz's web page: <http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/drs6/>

Helen: Why do you write poetry?

Daniel: I think most writers—and I include myself—write primarily when we need to delve into our psyches and discover who we are and, secondarily but still importantly, when we need to share the results of that process with others. I use words to understand myself and the world I live in. I have kept a diary most of my life, briefly recording events and my responses daily. Poetry is a way I come to terms with my feelings in a disciplined form. My poems respond to events and experiences about which I need to say something to myself.

Life's serious events evoke in me a need to put my thoughts into form, and that form on occasion becomes poetry. May I quote a 2002 poem?

WORDS

Are my mind's mirror,
editing what I see of self and world;
transforming brine in which ideas soak:
Imagination's amanuensis and muse,
giving shape to what might be.

Are nets in which I try to catch
swimming ephemera of my life;
while I have woven them tight,
from filaments of experience,
I do not always know how to set the nets
to catch tortured thoughts, tender feelings.

Are closets and drawers where I put my things,
ordering tentatively life's disorder;
honing tools to shape inchoate thoughts;
putty to fill insignificant gaps
where tiny drafts penetrate;
are whetstones to sharpen memory;
intricate mosaics shaped by experience
into elaborate patterns.

Are memory's archaeology
by which I excavate my past;
recall or create lost visions of childhood,
capture evanescent dreams;
nocturnal fictions of fulfillment,
undoing day's fantasies;
are soul's music, tongue's plaything,
mind's geometry and poetry.

Or, as Stevens put it in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949), "The poem is the cry of the occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it, / the poet speaks the poem as it is / Not as it was [The] words of the world are the life of the world."

My subjects often, but by no means always, are inspired by my personal life: the aging and recent death of my parents—my mother died in 2005 and my father in 2004—my sometimes difficult relations with my father, the evolution of my two sons' lives, my divorce and remarriage, family love and even some strife, romantic and marital love, and Jewish themes. My poems balance *carpe diem* with a deep sense of mortality that takes the form of awareness, fear, and reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of aging, illness, disability, death. Elegy echoes in many poems whether it be the premature death of friends' children, or the accidental death of a colleague. Sometimes elegy intersects with nostalgia. My poems often express my love of nature. As I contemplate nature's wonders, including seasonal changes, I often relate its movements to human rhythms. I am interested in cultural differences within America and the world. Finally, in the spirit of Stevens's "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never." My poems respect the power of the human mind.

The scope or corpus of my fifty or so published poems takes into account a good deal of my life and interests—art, travel, nature, food, literature, teaching, writing, and, of course, family. I address illness, aging, loss, loneliness and death,



as if one could exorcise these demons by writing about them. Writing does have therapeutic value, but, alas, those fears that we all share are part of living.

What do you see as your recurring themes?

I write as a humanist who believes that in our relatively brief time on earth we can make a difference to those we care about, including family, friends, and, yes, students. Playing on the theme that time is money, I counsel that time is time and really all we have.

Throughout my poems is a strong consciousness of mortality combined with a sense that life is to be lived and enjoyed fully. I have written a fair number of elegiac poems about times past and lives ended. But ended does not mean lost. For example, “Mother in Hospice, April 2005” is an encomium to a great lady whose life gained value from what she passed on. “Performance” reflects on my student Christopher Reeve’s tragic accident and who he really was apart from his role as Superman. Related to the elegiac mode is often nostalgia for what we imagine as simpler times, even while we know—as I indicate in the poems—that we reconstruct the past according to our dimly-acknowledged needs. In my poems, nostalgia goes hand in hand with a sense that we do learn from experience and that even in my 60s there is much life to be lived if luck holds out. And I have written love poems about the joys of falling in love and remarrying and poems about a relationship that didn’t quite make it. My passion for travel often informs my poems, whether directly or indirectly.

What do you see as the salient features of your poetry?

In terms of form, a salient feature is a small story—often derived from a simple observation—and narrative shifts back and forth from present to past and often back again. Thematically, a crucial feature in my poetry is the place of memory even while I understand that there is always a distinction between what as well as what we remember happened and a second distinction between what we remember and how we select and arrange that

memory into words. My poems often focus on the presence of the past; as George Eliot put it in *Middlemarch*: “A man’s past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present....It is a still quivering part of himself.” Rhetorically, a major feature is a belief in language and a belief that if we can only find the right words, we can communicate. Thus, I respect the audience and I strive to be lucid. I think of the epigraph to E.M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*: “Only connect.” Like Forster, I believe in personal relationships as a cornerstone to the building of a life. I believe in the capacity of the human mind to understand and believe, despite all our failings, that we need others—family, friends, community.

My belief in language even carries over to my naively optimistic belief in communication through language as a way to solve larger misunderstandings between different political visions, although I do not often address in my poems explicitly political themes. If we can only talk about a problem, I believe we have a chance to solve it.

How have your writing and teaching about literature affected your poetry?

I am a humanist as teacher, critic, scholar, and poet, and that means I place a strong emphasis on how humans live. Even in the high tide of theory, I have—without sacrificing attention to the formal aspects of literature as well as the need to understand historical contexts—focused on literature as artistic works by humans, about humans, and for humans. Humanistic criticism believes that the doing—technique, structure, and style—is important because it reveals or discusses the meaning inherent in the subject. Our goal should be an empathetic reading of a text to discover the conscious and unconscious patterns of language that the author built into a text; those patterns usually convey a vision of how humans live. We should read literature as an imagined representation of historical events and human behavior. Human behavior is central to most works and should be the major concern of analysis. Thus, our interest as readers is in how fictional people behave—what they fear, desire, doubt, need—and fictional includes poetry and drama as well as novels and stories. Although



modes of characterization differ, the psychology and morality of characters need to be understood as if they were real people; for understanding others like ourselves helps us to understand ourselves.

When I write a poem I descend into myself, but the words are for not only myself but others whom I hope will respond to them. As the 2006 Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk puts it, “[O]nce we have shut ourselves away we soon discover that we are not as alone as we thought. We are in the company of the words of those who came before us, of other people’s stories, other people’s books—the thing we call tradition. I believe literature to be the most valuable tool that humanity has found in its quest to understand itself.”

Among other things, I am in part what I have read. We are what we experience, and for me reading and visiting museums are central to my experience since I have spent much of my life engaged in these activities. As your fine essay shows, I have studied the modernist literary tradition, which I teach and write about, especially the English and Irish tradition—Joyce, Hopkins, Stevens, Auden—as well as such painters as Picasso and Cezanne. My poetry has been influenced by my study of the relationship between modern art and modern literature, entitled *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature* (1997). Examples of the influence of art can be found in many of the poems.

To return to literary influences, I have been influenced by Hopkins in terms of my use of phonics and in dramatizing confrontations with nature; the phrase, “I caught at dawn,” from my “Charleston Lake, Ontario, August 1996,” echoes the opening of Hopkins’s great sonnet “The Windhover.” “Reading Texts, Reading Lives” and “Ocean Pleasures” show my familiarity with Stevens. It is hardly surprising, since I am a Joyce scholar, that “Snowbound” begins with an epigraph from Joyce’s “The Dead” and that I have written a poem entitled “Reading Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” I have also been influenced by the American tradition as my epigraphs from Hawthorne and Emerson show—and with Emerson I have even borrowed the title of one his best-known essays.

Does your narrative focus derive from your interest in teaching narrative?

I think the uses of multiple time frames and the desire to tell a small story come from my interest in narrative, but also from my sense that stories—even anecdotes—enact values. Narrative is both the representation of external events and the telling of those events. My interest in narrative derives from my belief that we make sense of our lives by ordering them and giving them shape. The stories we tell provide continuity among the concatenation of diverse episodes in our lives. Each of us is continually writing and rewriting in our minds the texts of our lives, revising our memories and hopes, proposing plans, filtering disappointments through our defenses and rationalizations, making adjustments in the way we present ourselves.

Furthermore, the emphases on dramatizing a distinct voice within my poems comes from my interest in lyric and in strong fictional characters—including reliable and unreliable narrators—who reveal their psyches and values, their personalities, with their quirks and idiosyncrasies, in their speaking voices. Of course, the dramatized speaking voice changes with the subject, and sometimes the voice is a dramatized version of my response to a particular moment. Other times, it is more of a persona as in “The American Scholar” or “The Muse Returns.”

My strength is the efficiently-told tale rather than the striking image, although I occasionally hit the mark with the latter, as in “Remarriage.” I think I am at my best as an observer; opportunities to travel have afforded me opportunities for observation of nature and people, whether it be a refugee from the Holocaust or a lobsterman in Maine. I would say lucidity, succinctness, the ability to control multiple time frames within a brief poem to represent a small but illustrative story are my strengths, and maybe the failure to find the most original way of saying is a weakness. I don’t do much with rhyme, although I do often write in regular lines.



Is the persona yourself, as often seems evident when you write about family issues, or is it a dramatized person?

Certainly, in “The American Scholar” and “The Muse Returns,” the voice is that of a comic persona who is trying to find his voice. But even when the voice originates within myself, it forms another “speaking self” within the ontology of the poem. Writing poetry exposes the deeply-buried self—the fixations and obsessions, the dark memories, the pain we barely recognize—what Palmuk calls the “secret wounds” and creates a persona different from the everyday social self. The speaking voice in my poetry is not the everyday self who gets up, brushes his teeth, has breakfast, and drives off to work, but an intensified and particularized self whose words are carefully chosen and refined with an imagined audience in mind. The voice exists within the imagined ontology of the formal poem.

How do you compose? Can you take us through the creative process?

I begin a poem when I feel strongly about something I have felt or seen. I write something down in my computer, or in a notebook or a slip of paper if the computer isn’t there. At a later time—hours, days, weeks, and months—I might sketch a draft of a poem, revise it, and play with words. I might let it rest for days or weeks, returning every so often to fine tune it, tighten it, and omit unnecessary words, especially articles. The need to communicate to the imagined audience enters more prominently into the creative process at the time of revision. Sometimes, I fine-tune for months and years, and then suddenly I think, “Yes, it is ready.” Even after submitting a poem, I may notice a place where fine-tuning is necessary, or an editor may make a valuable suggestion for revision. When I begin to like it, I show it to my wife, Marcia, a retired professor, and perhaps to another reader I respect. I find computers help me immeasurably; I think now with frustration of the experience of having to retype of my earlier scholarly writing.

Has your feel for nature been affected by living in rural upstate New York?

I grew up in what we thought was the country, in suburban Long Island, and I remember even then having a favorite birch tree in a yard, enjoying the still beauty of a snowy day, and my family nurturing baby rabbits abandoned by their mother. Living near the ocean helped me appreciate the seasonal effects on the sea and marine life, and a handful of my published poems reflect that. But certainly, living in Ithaca for 39 years and, as I do now, in the country with a home overlooking a pond—albeit within a mile of Cornell—has deepened my appreciation of seasonal rhythms. I enjoy bird watching and snorkeling. I revel in the process of nature—freezing and thawing, snow and sunshine, sunrises and sunsets—and the variety of birds and the observable differences in plants virtually every day. That appreciation carries over to my response to nature wherever I am. Writing poetry helps me see and hear the natural world—as in “Spring Sounds”—but seeing and hearing the natural world also help me write poetry.

Does your Jewish background play a role in your poetry?

I am a secular Jew with respect for Jewish traditions and history but without a certainty of God’s presence: I have problems when I ask myself, “Where was God during the Holocaust or the killing fields in Cambodia or during black enslavement here and elsewhere, and why is there is so much individual and collective suffering in the world?” Yet, I was Bar-Mitzvahed, and so were my children. I have been married twice by a rabbi in Jewish wedding ceremonies and have belonged to a temple for decades. So clearly, the Jewish tradition is important to me. I have published several poems on Jewish history, the Holocaust, Jewish rituals, Jewish holidays, and the Old Testament. Certainly, writing my book, *Imagining the Holocaust* (1999), brought some of these themes to the forefront of my thinking.

