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H O L L Y

Interview:

Holly Hunt



BY MELISSA BRUNER

“My dreams and otherworldly visions have always influenced my poetry,” says Holly Hunt, a poet whose work follows the tradition of other mystical poets including William Blake and Walt Whitman. Three of Hunt’s poems included in this issue of *Westview* bear evidence of that influence. Hunt has much to say about the current position of poetry in our culture, writing and publishing poetry and fiction, and her own imaginative projects.

Q: *When you browse through a bookstore, you find walls filled with fiction, and entire sections devoted to true crime, travel, history, and psychology, to name a few. The poetry sections, if present at all, are usually quite small, perhaps indicating that there isn’t much demand for poetry from the general population of readers. This hasn’t always been the case; in the past, poetry was read and enjoyed by most people. Why are people now less interested in poetry than people of previous generations?*

A: Poetry today is submerged as a medium for communication. At the turn of this century, before the advent of film, people read quite a bit. That’s how they got their entertainment. They often read poetry aloud to each other. Poetry was one of the ways people entertained themselves. Today, I don’t think that people have been taught to read poetry, and I don’t think that they have been taught to be open to the medium.

Poetry hasn’t been promoted as a medium of expression as it should be. Poetry could sell just like anything else, but editors don’t believe that it could. They think—many people think—that there is some mysterious, closed-school spell because one has broken one’s lines on the page. Well, there *is* a spell that comes with breaking lines, but any person who’s ever sung “Here we go round the mulberry bush” can hook into it with delight.

The school systems have fallen short where promoting writing as an art is concerned. A child may take music or dancing or painting if that child is talented or has a desire to learn that art. But there is usually no outlet for a child who has a gift for writing.

H U N T

Writers in any field, whether creative or academic, struggle with finding a market for their work. Since poetry is, as you say, submerged, how difficult is it for a poet to publish her poetry?

Publishing poetry is quite difficult. When I set about to submit poetry for publication, I usually submit around forty poems to various publications. About two poems out of those forty will be accepted for publication somewhere. And that, of course, is luck if you have two poems accepted like that. Fiction is twice as publishable as poetry. One thing that's hard for a poet is that the poet is interested in designing a career around the medium of poetry, but they may not have easy outlets for publication. It's easier to shoot in the dark with fiction than it is with poetry. My first and second novels are now with an agent. I wasn't schooled to write fiction like I was poetry, but I read a lot of fiction and that's how I learned how to do it. The novel is not a very difficult medium, not nearly as difficult to write as poetry. It seems to be less compacted.

Other than a desire to find another outlet for publication, what motivated you to begin writing fiction?

In South Carolina I took workshops with James Dickey and the fiction writer William Price Fox, and that's when I began to write novels. Dickey was primarily a poet, but he'd written very successful novels, and it just occurred to me that there was no reason why a poet shouldn't be able to write anything a poet wants to write. I like writing novels, and I can tell different stories with that medium.

You began writing poetry when you were 15. What writers influenced you as a beginner?

I was first influenced by Rod McKuen and Khalil Gibran, because I got their books at K-Mart. When I first read Rod McKuen I thought "I can do that," but anybody half breathing could write like Rod McKuen. During the next two years I read the poetry of William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and it occurred to me then what poetry was really all about. That was an exhilarating jump, and one which I was prepared for by my parents, who were both mystics. Mother, who died when I was ten, taught me to believe in fairies, and I still do. I don't see them anymore, but I believe that that force exists and that it's personified by the human imagination.

My second influences, the 19th century Romantics, believed that you could get to heaven through poetry, and I thought that was a wonderful shortcut that was to be trusted. William Blake, especially; he had the ability to see angels, and I really admired that ability, and did everything I could to mimic it. I found out that it could be done.

The next group of people who influenced my writing were the Confessionalists Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell. At first I was really attracted to Lowell because I couldn't understand him, and I knew that he was working an intense mystical spell with his work that I loved but couldn't understand at first. So I kept digging. The two women writers were very easy to understand and I learned to appreciate them for their clarity and lack of confusion. Then, in graduate school, I

was influenced by James Dickey because he writes from a traditional lyric power. Today, I am influenced by the voices in contemporary fiction and poetry, which I read a lot of. I like Louise Erdrich, Sharon Olds, and Amy Clampitt. Those are the voices I really love.

Some writers find that particular places or environments inspire or motivate them to write. Is this true for you?

For some writers, artists, or creative personalities, it's very important and necessary for them to be in a metropolitan area such as New York or Boston or San Francisco; they feed off of the society and enrich themselves by being in a highly cultured area. But for other artists, it doesn't matter where you are. If I was writing poetry at age 15 in the middle of Bismark, Arkansas, I can do it anywhere; it doesn't matter where I am. James Baldwin says that the home you really have is the home you carry with you, and that's where my home is. It's on the inside.

Is there any particular writing technique that works well for you?

I prefer short poems. The short lyric is usually written from an emotional high point. I like to write from that crest. If I can make a feeling last for 20 minutes, I can usually complete a first draft. I can come back to that poem at a later draft and regenerate that spirit and find a conclusion, but it's as hard as finishing a dream that's been cut off in the middle of the night, and it sometimes takes years to finish those dreams. With "Glass of Wine for a Moonchild," it took me at least a year to realize I'd been dreaming that dream over and over again, and then finally had a conclusion come to me. Poetry is synonymous

with those kinds of dreams. It works on the same level. "

Hunt is currently printing a collection of 14-line quatrains. It is not unusual for a poet to print her own work, but it is rare for a poet to make her own books, accomplishing nearly every step in the printing process herself.

"I'm using an old press from the art department here at Cameron. I've learned my leading and monotype composition, and have everything set out in my office. Every now and then it hits me like a bolt of lightning that I may have to publish my own books of poetry, and I'm not averse to that because that's what William Blake did as a book artist, and that's what Kenneth Patchen did in the 20th century. I've made my paper for the cover; it's all been hand-torn. All I have to do is the composition of the type, which takes a great deal of time. It's not really muscle work, but it's hand work, like building houses out of toothpicks.

"The book's title is *Tramp Art for the Walls of Purgatory*, and it's a surreal collection of poetry written by a persona who's trapped in a flea market. She describes all the strange things she sees, the spiritually empowered items, and she realizes that she will not be able to escape the flea market until she learns to accept all of the broken-down things in the world. She finally does escape.

"The final poem came about two years after the conception of the original poem, so it took me a while to get out of the flea market through the medium of poetry. This will hold together as a piece of book art, and it's an exciting thing. I know when I make this book, it will change me in some way. It will be a great positive change. I've always thought of myself as an artist with words, but not with physical art. This book will open up a whole new world of experience for me." ■