

Saying what cannot be said any other way: An interview with Poet & Professor Robert Wrigley

Q: *How does a poet go about achieving “emotional honesty”? Does it begin --as Richard Hugo writes in *The Triggering Town*-- with allowing yourself to accept that there is a relationship between the first line you write and the one that follows? And then how do you stay honest?*

A: I don’t see emotional honest any differently from any other sort of honesty. The fact is, however, that—for me—the primary engine that drives a poem is the language itself. When I write what seems to be the first line of a poem, I honestly have little or no idea what the next line will be, and I allow sound (by which I mean rhyme, assonance, alliteration—the music of language) to guide me. It’s a very difficult thing for a young poet to learn, to trust the poem more than his/her own notions about what follows; it’s about trusting the language and your abilities with language. That said, you can fictionalize, you can make up things, but those fictions have to true to the poem’s larger intent. You know if you’re being honest. You just do. I tell my students that writing poetry is a kind of absolute free speech, and that sort of freedom requires that you be responsible and completely honest. Honestly, I don’t think it’s that hard being honest, emotionally or otherwise; what’s hard is writing honestly in such a way that a reader both senses that honesty and is moved by how it is transmitted.

Q: *As you revise a poem, do you attempt to hone your truth to a greater degree of accuracy—or expand it to a greater degree of universality-- or does your attention turn to the sound of the language? In other words: In revision, what do you consciously tweak, mostly, and why?*

A: All of the above, actually. Revision for me depends on the poem. Some poems come more easily and need mostly just tweaking. Others need to be reconceived, started over from what seemed like the end. I’ve been working on a single poem for months now. It’s poem that means to examine American cultural and political values and it’s now in its 119th different version. Seriously. And I’m not sure if it’s done or even close. More than anything else, revision for me is about unifying a poem, making sure that what gets said early in the poem connects in as many ways as possible to what gets said later. Sometimes that means making logical connections; sometimes it means reinforcing connections via sound. The aim, finally, is to make everything the poem says seem inevitable, to make the poem read as though it simply could not have been said any other way.

Q: *What’s the hardest work a poet does?*

A: Writing is hard work. All of it. And writing something that aspires to the condition of literature is very, very hard. It’s all difficult, but what is there that’s easy and still rewarding? Not much. I suppose the hardest thing for me is, having finished a poem, having put it away and considering it ready to go out into the world, then it’s back to square one. Starting over. I see my wife (Kim Barnes) working for four or five years on the same project—a novel or a memoir—and I simply cannot imagine how she does it, how she gets up every writing day and knows what she has to work on. It would feel like digging a very, very long ditch to me. On the other hand, I seem to be continually starting over, staring at the blank sheet of paper, and thinking, OK, now what? That’s murder. But the only way to get past it is to start, to put words on paper, the get the pump delivering water and see what you can float.

Q: *What are the greatest challenges and rewards of teaching poetry writing? Does it impact your own writing?*

A: When you teach poetry writing, you have to be more or less constantly asking for more. You find yourself saying, OK, this is good, but it needs to be better. And somehow you have to balance that with an appropriate amount of encouragement. It means you have to try to understand each student poet individually. You have to imagine what he or she is after and help the poem that comes into being still be wholly the student's own production. So you're a little bit of a psychiatrist, a little bit palmist, a little bit savant, a confessor, and you also have to be a cheerleader and an absolutely uncompromising task-master. We're lucky here. Our students are supremely gifted. They write so much better than I did when I was at the stage they're at, it sort of takes the breath away. But you have to teach them to be hard on themselves, because when they leave here, they have to build a readership on their own, and you only do that by writing at the top of your abilities.

I've learned more teaching poetry than I ever did as a student. In part this is simply because I was a student for about four years, and I've been teaching for more than thirty. But the wonderful thing is this: I never stop learning. You want to learn something? Teach somebody else to do it. At some point—I don't know, maybe my collected poems, when I'm dead and gone—I'll have to dedicate a book to my many students. They've helped me enormously.

The impact, then, comes in two ways: I learn as I teach, and that's good. And then there's the time that teaching takes. It's awfully hard work and it takes time. Fortunately, it's also enormously rewarding.

Q: *Over the years, your poetry has moved from narrative to a more lyrical style. What brought about that change and what does the lyrical approach allow you to do or communicate more effectively?*

A: I still write narratives—poems that tell stories—but it's true that, as I've gotten older, I'm more inclined toward the lyrical mode. Why? I'm not sure, but I think it's got to do with the centrality of the lyric in the tradition of poetry. Lyric poetry was meant to be sung, and though it's come a long way from the days it might have required musical accompaniment, I love the fact that the lyric poem is its own kind of music. It's also true—mostly—that lyric poems are the poems people remember and recite. I was in South Carolina last fall, at a literary festival, and I read a short poem ("A Lock of Her Hair." It's on the Poetry Foundation website at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=181709>), and after my reading, I ran into a young man who'd seen the poem in a magazine, had memorized it, and then recited it to me at the signing table outside the hall. That was a wonderful thing, that he'd memorize my poem. And his recitation was delightful too.

Q: *As a parent, I find "Do You Love Me?" haunting. It is a nice study of human and animal consciousness, the power of human language, the body language of dog love, and the collision of those dialects. Can you talk about what's going on in that poem a little?*

A: In a way, the poem is about the limits of language, the way that kids can be both frustrated by and, even more, liberated by language. The dog in the poem is doing the best it can, but it simply cannot say the words the little girl longs to hear. In a way, that's what poets are continually trying to do: to say what cannot be said any other way.

Q: *What are your thoughts on language? How does it differ, as a medium, from paint? How is it similar to music? What properties and powers are uniquely its own?*

A: Language is my life, I like to say, especially when I say something wrong or silly. The fact is, there is no more important skill than the skill with language. None. Math is right up there, I'll admit it, but the ability to communicate accurately and clearly is absolutely the most important skill anyone can learn. If you can speak and write well, everything else you do will come to you more easily. But the thing to remember is that we use the same words to wound and to woo, to lie and to tell the gospel truth. Skill with language comes with enormous responsibility.

I think, in terms of art, that music is probably superior to all other arts. But language and music are two sides of a single coin. And if music can go to places, both intellectually and emotionally, that language cannot, then language can go places that music cannot. As the dog proves in "Do You Love Me?", there are sometimes no alternatives to just saying it.

Q: *What needs does poetry meet for readers, and for a culture?*

A: Poetry purifies the language. Great poems reinvent the language. The greatest poems cannot be said any other way. They cannot be paraphrased or summarized. A culture without poetry is a disabled culture, an incomplete culture, a broken culture. Readers know this. After 9/11 poetry sales and poems swapped via email skyrocketed. People were looking for a kind of language purified, with all the cant and political jockeying and posturing cut out. And poetry was where a great many people found that clarity and honesty.

Q: *Why is it, do you think, that a poem like Moonlight: Chickens on the Road which is such a unique event, feels like a memory pulled from collective consciousness? It's like a tiny Greek tragedy with the chickens as the chorus. I picture the whole thing happening in diamond mine of hoarfrost, then I go back, and find only that it's November, and windy. What is archetypal or universal about that story? Is it loss that is really the familiar territory?*

A: The situation—a child, the sole survivor of a terrible accident—is immediately dramatic. We feel for the kid there, but we also sense the simple enormity and blessing of his having survived. I suppose I'd say that the poem's about a central and beautiful human quality: that no matter what horrible thing happens to us, we go on. We have to. As President Obama said we need to do in his inaugural address, in bad times we have to "pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off" and keep on going and make things better. People are routinely heroic and brave. It's part of our biological make-up, our DNA. We suffer terrible losses, but we get up and we go on. Perhaps the poem makes us sense that we ourselves could do exactly as the kid in the poem does. He keeps on living.