

# E - X - C - H - A - N - G - E - V - A - L - U - E - S

PRIMARILY INTERVIEWS ABOUT POETRY, POETICS, POETS BY TOM BECKETT AND GUESTS

SUNDAY, MAY 06, 2007

## Interview with Barry Schwabsky

**Tom Beckett:** Where did/does poetry begin for you?

**Barry Schwabsky:** Your giving me a choice of tenses seems to offer me a choice between, let's say, developmental and ontological types of answers. To give an answer of the first type, I could say that it began when I was, I think, a sophomore in high school. Somehow I read or someone told me that someone had written a book-length poem about my town. I was so flabbergasted that anyone would want to do such a thing that I went to the library in order to find a copy and see for myself: So I came to *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams. Fascinated by what I read, I looked for more Williams; Williams led me to Pound, and after that I just read anything I could put my hands on (sometimes even, I'm sorry to say, shoplift) that was published by New Directions. That publishing house was my education.

But of course I already had a sense of poetry before I had an inkling of modern poetry as the House of Laughlin taught it. My father had never been to college—something I believe he'd lived as a deep injury as a young man—but my mother had had a single year at Brooklyn College before she'd had to go to work. From that year she'd kept a fat black poetry anthology that she'd had for an English course. It was one of the more prominent items in our tiny bookcase, and it always fascinated me, even before I could understand much of anything in it. And of course back beyond that there were all the children's rhymes and chants with their verbal magic.

But there were also beginnings after that, for instance, the moment when my eye was drawn to an interesting dust jacket spine in the Paterson library and I took out John Bernard Myers' *Poets of the New York School*—a huge beginning for me. I remember how John Ashbery's "Clepsydra" appeared to me as an impenetrable wall of words. I thought I would scale it some day, and eventually did. But O'Hara, Koch, and Elmslie, for instance, were more immediately rewarding.

And what about retroactive beginnings? A few years ago, I took my daughter to see Cocteau's *Orpheus*—a film I'd loved as a young man and seen several times but not for at least twenty-five years. Re-seeing it, I realized that this film had given me a certain image of a poetic vocation that had stayed with me long after I'd stopped thinking about

ABOUT ME

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the film itself: as the desperate effort to transcribe enigmatic transmissions on a radio that no one else can hear. Obviously there were reasons why, when I later read Jack Spicer for the first time, he made perfect sense to me.

**TB:** Where does your poetry come from?

**BS:** That's the question, isn't it? Because it does come from somewhere. When I read something I've written, and it seems good, then I think, "Damn, this is good! I wish I could write like that!" So I don't believe it comes from me. (Although I'm happy to take the credit anyway.) When there is something in it that dissatisfies me, something that is only approximate, that something is what I recognize as coming from me, just me—my haste, my lack of nerve, whatever. My job is to try and spare the poetry from all that. Frank Stella once said, "I try and keep the paint as good on the canvas as it was on the can." Likewise, I try and keep the language as good on the page as it was in the air, where my antenna picked it up.

**TB:**Your response reminds me of these words from the title poem in your book *Opera*:

The poet who thinks for me  
detests the writer who bears my name.

You are a professional art critic. I'm wondering how you think that activity influences your practice as a poet.

**BS:** People always ask me that! Well, for one thing, it takes time away from poetry—but then so does every job. On the other hand it gives me a lot to think about. Art that inspires me gives as much to my poetry as poetry that inspires me does, or music, or whatever. When I was younger I think it was very important for me to see how artists use materials. It gave me the sense that I could use language as a material too—almost sculpturally. Rather than mainly in its relation to interiority, which might have been a debilitatingly strong tendency on my part otherwise.

As an art critic, I hone a craft of writing that is different from but related to the writing of poetry. I keep trying to become a better writer and I think I have succeeded. My increasing mastery of prose must have some effect on my writing as a poet.

There's another thing: The art world is a much more "worldly" world than the poetry world. A lot of money flows through it, even though a critic never gets very close to that much of it. People in the art world dress so much better than most poets do! I think there's something quite instructive about being a tad closer to capital, which after all remains the bedrock reality of our social existence.

**TB:** I earn my living as a Health Inspector. I crawl around bedrock realities a lot. It gets messy.

One thing I always try to draw poets out on, with varying results, is their felt relationship to social reality. Do you think you as a poet have any special social responsibilities?

**BS:** I think doing one's work well—doing it for what it is in itself without subordinating it to one's own ego, for instance—is a big responsibility that everyone has, no matter what kind of work they do. It's also important not to propagate falsehood, which for me means that there are certain kinds of manipulative rhetoric that are foreign to my writing. On the other hand I don't expect my poems to make people's lives better in any other way than to provide thought and pleasure. That's as for responsibility. As for social reality, the work comes from that reality and is permeated by it. I don't need to make any special effort to include it. It's there, willy-nilly. But funny enough, the whole question of social responsibility is very subjective. What does it mean to you? Somehow I have the idea that a health inspector must have a much more concrete sense of it than an art critic.

**TB:** I work in a number of different environmental programs. It's a small department. One has to be a generalist and have a tolerance for dealing with garbage, human waste, insects, rodents and angry people. The bulk of my time is spent doing housing and food service inspections. The job can be physically demanding and is not without risks. I've been assaulted and I've had a gun held to my head, not to mention some frightening encounters with dogs. I've learned to listen hard and to look at things carefully.

The incidents just alluded to occurred during housing inspections. One never knows what one is going to find when one walks into someone else's dwelling. Once I entered the living room of a single-family rental property. The tenant was sitting on a recliner which rested on a hardwood floor. The floor was riddled with perfectly cut round holes, each about 10 inches in diameter, which were spaced at, oh, three or four foot intervals. I had to step over several of them to approach the gentleman in the recliner.

"Sir," I said, "there are a lot of holes in the floor. What's the story?" He: "The furnace isn't working. Thought it might improve the circulation of air." He was serious. His problem (not enough heat) hadn't been addressed by his landlord, so he attempted to solve the problem with his own limited knowledge-- and power tools! Only to make the situation worse.

Many of the issues I see in the course of my work day are the result of greed, laziness, ignorance, inattentiveness or mental illness. It can be very difficult to cut through at times. That said, I believe it to be worth the effort.

I think the responsibility of every human being, but especially an artist, is to cultivate the ability to attend and respond.

**BS:** A big question would be the relation between "attending" and

“responding.” Some people respond precipitously—they haven’t allowed themselves to attend sufficiently before responding. Others have the opposite problem—too diffident about responding to what they have perceived. It’s hard to get the right balance. I’m surely in the second category, among the diffident, unfortunately.

**TB:** I am often in the second category as well, Barry. But I think about these issues less in terms of balance than I do in terms of risk. I’ve often repeated my thought that a poem is akin to an unsolicited kiss. Poems and unexpected kisses evoke similar ranges of response. What’s at risk for you in a poem?

**BS:** Watch out you don’t get accused of lyrical harassment one of these days.

There are all sorts of social decorum one might be afraid of violating in a poem. Sometimes I’m afraid of sounding sentimental, for instance. It’s a question of knowing whether your rule of thumb—“Avoid sentimentality” is probably a good one—is helping you stick closer to what the poem should be or whether in this instance your rule is in fact preventing you from realizing that. On some rare occasions a poem will be falsified if you don’t allow it a necessary sentimentality. That’s just one example. Another: Because most of my poems are short, I have to watch out for my fear that they are insubstantial: Am I perhaps trying to make a poem longer because I suspect a short one is less impressive? Or on the contrary, is the poem short because I haven’t pushed myself enough to develop it as it might be? Another worry: Is the poem too hermetic? The list could go on....

Then there’s the risk that the whole effort is null—that I am completely on the wrong track. A while back, I read something that Matisse wrote, where he said that early on, when his work was finding little acceptance, he would say to himself, “If Cézanne was right, then I’m right.” I was touched by the need to cleave to a precursor, not for any sort of specific “influence,” but simply to take courage. I say something of the sort to myself when I need courage, though some people might find in this comparison merely a proof of my inflated ego: “If Paul Celan was right, then I’m right.” It would be so easy to say almost every choice of his was wrong—and that’s part of his greatness, that he made it all so right.

**TB:** What gets you going, makes you want to write?

**BS:** It could be anything, really. Sometimes it’s just something that I hear, or read, that strikes me as strange and somehow of poetic interest. I might start repeating that thing in my head, and as I do, it starts to attract more language to it—more things I notice. And so a poems starts to crystallize. Other poems start in a much more deliberate manner, when there is some particular linguistic field I want to delve into. For instance, there was one point—this was quite a long while ago, but it makes a clear example—when I had it in mind that I

wanted to write some hymns. But it was hard to get into the right spirit for it. So I started by making a poem entirely out of pieces of language taken from Thomas Traherne's "Centuries"—a prose book, not a book of hymns, but which I thought had the right kind of rhythm and cadence to help bring to this hymnlike state of mind. After that I was able to write a hymn that wasn't dependent on a specific source. But only just one.

What never comes into it is that the poems never begin with some topic that I want to address. They are not discursive in that way—though some of them might be about discursivity. They really tend to come either from concrete bits of language, or from a certain linguistic terrain, and with the feelings that revolve around that. I don't want you to think that because I speak of language rather than subjects that I am dealing with words in a somehow objective manner. I don't think that's the case. I am dealing with language but what gives the poem its form is always, I hope, the emotional thread that runs through it, maybe almost invisibly but nonetheless essential for that.

**TB:** I know what you mean about proceeding from concrete bits of language. I've often thought about it in terms of establishing *constellations* of language or vocabulary. Do you often work from source texts? And what are your thoughts about appropriation in terms of your work?

**BS:** I have periodically written pieces that are in some form or another, usually partly, derived from a specific source text. Not only literary sources. My first chapbook, *The New Lessons*, was derived from a vocabulary book. I'm still quite attached to that work. Another poem came from a typing manual. In those cases, as with the Traherne poem, I literally collaged bits of language from the sources. I haven't done anything like that for a long time, though. Somehow I can't be bothered to work so systematically any more. I need to work in a more mercurial fashion. Still, some more recent things are more loosely derived from a specific source—in some more subjective way, without literally extracting and recontextualizing existing material. For instance, "Opera" comes from an Italian poem *Il Fiore*, which has (wrongly, I'm sure) been attributed to Dante and is in turn a version of the French *Roman de la Rose*. I couldn't even tell you how the poem is related to its source—I don't remember! But it definitely comes from that. I was always interested in Burroughs' cut-up methods as a sort of secular divination. These days, though, the idea of doing anything very methodically makes me feel very tired. Somehow I prefer the idea that the poem emerges against the background of a certain resistance to it, rather than from a concerted effort to make it appear.

**TB:** I'm interested in exploring that notion of resistance in the composition of a poem. Could you flesh it out a bit?

**BS:** Shouldn't one somehow be a bit skeptical? The Canadian poet Rob McLennan recently asked on his blog, "Who (in their right mind, I wonder) *chooses* poetry?" Well, someone once said that you don't

choose poetry, poetry chooses you. So why not play a little hard to get? Let poetry make a little effort. At least that way you see whether it has a certain minimum of force. Plus it should become more concentrated through the process of working against the resistance.

You know, some poets—including some of the best—seem to find it important to simply produce a certain quantity of material that is recognizably theirs. Possibly this is because they see themselves as professional poets, and the point of a profession is to practice it. Whereas I'd rather prevent a certain quantity of run-of-the-mill work from coming into existence. Which may have something to do with the fact that I don't see myself as a professional poet, and furthermore I don't even see poetry as a profession. There are certain times and places where it can be a profession but I don't believe that ours is one of them. In my lifetime in America, probably the only true professional poets have been Allen Ginsberg and, eventually, John Ashbery. Otherwise, there are professional professors of poetry, but that's not quite the same thing—though it's probably one of the factors that encourages overproduction.

On the other hand, some people would simply say that I am “retentive” or “repressed.” Overly controlled or constrained. Maybe I am. But you know, you can't make poetry out of who you should be, you can only make it out of who you are.

**TB:** Why do you write poetry?

**BS:** Out of a fascination with language. And a surmise—it's almost embarrassing to say this today, but I have to be honest with you—that it can lead to the heart of being.

**TB:** What do you mean when you write "that it can lead to the heart of being"?

**BS:** If I knew the answer, I might not need poetry to help me thread my way toward it. Maybe it's “La maison où l'on n'entre pas” of which we read in a poem by Reverdy.

**TB:** Take me through one of your poems. Speak specifically to your motivations and decisions made along the way. Resist the urge to be easy on yourself (heh!).

**BS:** That's a tough one. A tremendous number of decisions enter into each poem but when things are going well, most of the decisions happen really fast. In retrospect, I truly can't remember what most of them were. And that's what I like about the poems! Although I put a lot of work into them, I like them when they don't actually remind me of that work. So since you posed this question, I've been looking over lots of poems trying to find one where I could answer you without just making the while thing up, but I can't. So am I going easy on myself? Could be. But you know, one of the great early inspirations was Borges, when he talked about how he had to find a way of working that would

accommodate his laziness—that, he claimed, was the reason why, instead of writing a novel, he would write a two-page story in the form of a review of the novel he hadn't written. Well, I'm lazy too! And I believe in finding ways of working that accommodate one's limitations. I haven't been able to find a way to avoid putting work into a poem—and I've never been the kind of writer who could work, either in prose or poetry, without lots of revising—no “first thought, best thought” for me—but at least I've succeeded in finding a way that allows me to forget the work. Like my wife having no concrete recollection of the pain of giving birth. But if there's anything in any of the poems that makes you want to ask, “Why did you do that?” or “Where did that come from?” I'll do my best to answer.

**TB:** I'm very fond of your chapbook-poem *Tephra*. Could you speak to its composition, some of your motivations? It's particularly interesting to me that every section of that text hinges in some way on parenthetical notations.

**BS:** That poem was written primarily, as I recall, on a train from Paris to Nimes and back. Travel is often good for my poetry—airplanes are bad but trains and hotel rooms are good. I guess it's all the down time you have, where all your usual inputs and distractions are gone, that lets it emerge. The “banners of silken laundry” at the beginning came from an art installation I'd just seen at a Paris gallery. As I recall, the parentheses were not something I foresaw from the beginning. At a certain point, well into the process of working on the poem, it became evident that this was the only way to make the particular jumpy rhythm of the poem come through clearly enough. The poem was written not too long after a time in my life that was particularly tumultuous, emotionally—that period of extreme agitation was over but I was still somehow trying to process it. I think that's where a lot of the feeling-tone of the poem comes from. Almost more unusual for me than the use of parentheses is the fact that it is one of my few poems in a long time where not all the lines are flush left. Again, this has to do with bringing out a rhythmic effect that is somewhat in tension with itself. In this, it marks a shift in my practice: Most of the poems I'd been writing before that used mostly fairly conventional syntax, breaking out of that occasionally, but generally using enjambment to play the line off against units of sense—this play between the two was my main musical resource. After “*Tephra*,” most of the poems have a much more fragmented syntax and the syntactical unit is much more often equal to a line. The more recent poems have little or no punctuation until the poems ends with a full stop—there is much less forward movement through them, they are more “floaty”—and it's as if the poem is wandering a bit, sliding, and only comes to a stop when it stops.

**TB:** Speaking of musical resources, references to music appear with great frequency in your poetry.

**BS:** Yes, that's true—though I doubt they are more frequent than references to poetry. Music has inspired me all my life. Speaking recently with Richard Hell, I said that as a teenager I went to CBGB's

looking for the same things I was looking for in the Gotham Book Mart. That's a thought I'd never precisely formulated in that way before, but I think it's true. One way that music helped form my style was that it opened me up to the beauty of incomprehensibility. I've always been fascinated by the way, when you listen to a song, quite a lot of the words can be really incomprehensible—just part of the musical texture, yet with an apparent communicative thrust to it even though you can't make out just what is being communicated—but then some quite clear and striking phrase will emerge. There's a kind of dialectical relation between not-understanding and understanding that somehow gives more value, maybe more poignancy to both. That's where the underground meaning is. And that's why when you read the printed lyric it's usually so flat, so disappointing—because that dialectic is missing. It's what lets the listener construct her own lyric, but not just any one, rather the one that speaks to her from the singer's place. Like what the doorkeeper says to the man from the country in "Before the Law": "This door was intended only for you." So what I've always been interested in doing is something similar, but in such a way that this works exactly where the song fails to work, on the page, where it's just the naked words.

**TB:** Is theory/philosophy important to you?

**BS:** Well, my poetry is not what's sometimes called "theory-driven," if that's what you're asking. But I think that when you start to think reflectively about what you are doing, then you are on the terrain of philosophy or theory. And generally you can think better if you see how other people who have devoted themselves to thinking have thought. I studied philosophy in college and still read a good bit of it today. Lately I've been reading Giorgio Agamben, for instance. There's a particularity about the use of language in good philosophical writing that is not unrelated to the particularity about the use of language in poetry—though they are quite different particularities. For instance, philosophy tends to formalize language by circumscribing its vocabulary, whereas poetry tends to dilate its vocabulary in the course of its formalizations. And yet philosophy also produces neologisms much more readily than poetry does. I love it when new words come into my poems—I really never thought that "microdermabrasion" or "trustafarian" would ever get in there, yet there they are—but I don't invent any. Not that long ago I read a guy's obituary—unfortunately I've forgotten his name—and it said that he had coined the word "blurb." What an incredible poetic act that was! He had also coined some other words that had entered common usage. But wouldn't it be great to be able to write a word, an original word, and have it stand on its own as poetry? Of course then it might not enter common usage, but would always maintain a certain strangeness. In a way, each poem might be like a single long new compound word made of readymade parts. Maybe that's why my poems are usually so short.

**TB:** Why does poetry matter?

**BS:** Different poetics matter for different—even contradictory—



reasons. What I care for most is the intimate impersonality that addresses an unknown self. Maybe it's what Novalis was getting at when he spoke of an acoustics of the soul.

**TB:** Who are the writers you can't do without, the ones you return to over and over?

**BS:** "Can't do without" sounds kind of desperate. There are lots of writers, both of poetry and prose, whom I reread over the years, and I've mentioned some of them already. But "can't do without"? I'll admit that in moments of great extremity I turn to "Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop." But more broadly, and more calmly, there are some touchstones, maybe too many. The English Renaissance: Wyatt, Raleigh, obviously Shakespeare. German Romanticism: Hölderlin (mostly in Richard Sieburth's translation), the Athenæum fragments. French modernism: Rimbaud, Mallarme, Reverdy (and Kenneth Rexroth's introduction to his translation of Reverdy). The Americans: Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, Spicer, Ashbery, Scalapino. Celan. In prose, Kafka above all, but also James and Proust, writers whose work is constant self-reflection. And critical writers: Walter Benjamin, above all his correspondence with Scholem about Kafka; Adrian Stokes: "Luxury and Necessity of Painting"; Clement Greenberg; Paul de Man, who was briefly a teacher of mine; Roland Barthes. Enough already! I could go on. But it's interesting, and not surprising, that most of them are writers I read by the time I left formal education when I was 23; and certainly there are no names there whose work I encountered after the age of 30. There's a kind of receptivity that's possible when you're young that you lose eventually.

By the way, I have a question for you: Why did you ask about philosophy and theory, a while back, and not about another field of endeavor, say, history or politics? Do you see a more fundamental connection between poetry and philosophy than between poetry and other things?

**TB:** Absolutely. I think, at their best, that poetry and philosophy inhabit similar epistemo-ontological space. The "fundamental connection" swings on modes of questioning reality and on a rather hyper attentiveness to language.

**BS:** I see it that way too. Politics, for instance, may question reality but doesn't estrange language. But I am more frustrated with my nonunderstanding of a philosophical text than of a poetic one.

**TB:** Politics doesn't estrange language? I don't know about that; it often reverses the meaning of words--in fact empties them of meaning.

Perversely I'm not frustrated by my partial understanding of philosophical or poetic texts. I am there for what I *can* find, for what there is which is of use to me. Often reading poetry or philosophy I'll be entirely unfocused until a line jars me to attention and causes me to begin again with better results.

**BS:** The emptying of meaning you find in political rhetoric is the opposite of what I mean by estrangement. The words are meant to flow through you almost without your noticing them—they're meant to seem "natural."

**TB:** Doesn't a lot of mainstream, so-called "School of Quietude," poetry do exactly the same thing?

**BS:** I doubt it. Maybe there are some poets out there who don't want you to notice the words they use and how they use them, but I've never heard about it.

In any case, I wish Silliman would stop banging on about the School of Quietude. It's like a good joke that gets boring after you've heard it too often. I also don't care for the label "mainstream." Either we're the mainstream, or there is none.

**TB:** I don't want to belabor this, but I do believe there is a sort of linguistically transparent mainstream poetry, often coming out of MFA programs and workshop settings, which is pre-set, as it were, for the larger poetry publishing outfits. It is a poetry of anecdote and smooth surfaces which is prized for its accessibility. Every issue of *American Poetry Review* (it is still being published, right?) contains many examples.

**BS:** Maybe I'm being naïve. Not that much of the produce of the "larger poetry publishing outfits" ever crosses my field of vision. But maybe you don't see that much of it either. So what's our talk about it other than an exchange of prejudices? My prejudice is that when you talk about mainstream poetry you are probably talking about something with a very fussy, overwrought surface—not smooth at all, and not transparent. Something like Amy Clampitt. Am I completely off?

**TB:** I'm thinking about poetry writing which, if anything, is underwrought. Billy Collins' work comes to mind: a little word picture is painted, an amusing anecdote is related; but there is no depth to the writing, nothing is there but what is present on the surface. It's not evil or anything, but it's like fast food--a lot of empty calories. You read it, you get it. There's no reason to come back, there's nothing to engage.

**BS:** Funny enough, I just read a couple of poems of his for the first time the other day. They were in the *London Review of Books*. I'd never come across anything by him before. But I've already forgotten them! Which I guess is a strong argument in favor of your description being accurate. Still, I bet if you look carefully at the poems, they are full of all kinds of clever little turns that serve to give them their sort of understated pathos. Anyway, I'm sure there's something there for someone to dwell on. It's just that that someone is not me. But if the School of Quietude or mainstream consists of poetry that's both overwrought like Clampitt's and underwrought (which my spell-check is signaling me to say it's not a real word) like Collins', then I don't see

what makes them a school or a stream together. They are various things, perhaps mutually contradictory.

**TB:** Don't put too much faith in spell-check! But, hey, in what does your faith reside as a poet? What keeps you going?

**BS:** Maybe nothing. I don't always keep going. I didn't write or at least didn't finish any poems for about seven years from 1994 to 2000. That's unusual, but I've never written poetry in a steady sort of way. As I said, I'm not a professional poet. I do it when the need becomes stronger than the doubt. There's no reason why any poem shouldn't be the last. So faith doesn't come into it, or else my faith is weak or nonexistent. But on the upside, any time I accomplish something, I feel extremely lucky.

**TB:** What do you find to be most discouraging/encouraging about the current poetry scene(s)?

**BS:** What's most encouraging is that there is so much good poetry being written. Especially though of course far from exclusively among younger poets. When I read the work of people like Eleni Sikelianos, Linh Dinh, Kasey Mohammad, Catherine Wagner, Frances Richard, Amy King, Sarah Manguso or a bunch of others--well, it's just incredibly heartening. It gives me a great sense of possibility. They push me to be as radical as they are, in my own way.

**TB:** What's most discouraging?

**BS:** Being an art critic, I can't help but notice the paucity of serious criticism. It would be good if there were a more formalized medium for the echo a book of poetry makes among its readers.

**TB:** Do you think the internet could be the spawning ground (perhaps *sounding board* is the better term?) for the birthplace of those echoes?

**BS:** Some of the criticism that does exist is on the internet—for instance in Jacket. When Silliman sets himself to do a piece of sustained criticism on his blog, it's always superb. The Constant Critic seems to have gone dormant, but I liked that while it was going. But for the most part, the medium does not seem to favor the kind of developed, formalized discourse I have in mind. The question is, who'd be willing to do it? Not me. If you really took being a critic of your fellow poets' work seriously and did it honestly, you'd probably lose a lot more friends than you'd gain. Plus you'd have to cultivate a talent for one day being able to understand what sort of poetry Billy Collins is listening for and to what extent he's attained it, and then the next day doing the same for Lyn Hejinian—all the while without losing but rather deepening and nuancing your sense of the relative values of those distinct projects. That's the equivalent of what I do as an art critic, or what Roberta Smith does, or whoever. I can write about a landscape painter one day and a conceptual artist the next. It's true that the growth of blogs and internet journals has facilitated a more

spontaneous and informal discussion that is great to have—another one of the encouraging developments, absolutely—but this is something else.

**TB:** And finally, what can/what does poetry change?

**BS:** I don't know. What does picking at a scab change? You're worrying at something that bothers you, and it does give a sort of perverse pleasure, but still...

POSTED BY TOM BECKETT AT 9:44 AM

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#### 6 COMMENTS:

Anny Ballardini said...

I was privileged in the sense that I translated a longer poem by Barry Schwabsky meant to be the text of an art catalogue. When Tom asks Barry about the composition and motivation of his poems, and Barry sort of limits his answer to a certain laziness - even if by quoting Borges, I know instead that Barry is very precise and knows exactly the value, tone and intensity of each word. We sort of got mad in trying to translate "twitch". "We" because Barry can speak Italian, besides his many qualifications. It was a pleasure to listen to your conversation.

2:02 PM

Tom Beckett said...

Anny,

What was the word you finally chose to translate "twitch"?

4:57 PM

Anny Ballardini said...

Sorry, that was "tweaked", translated with "modulato" \_way distant but we had to find a compromise.

A wonderful colored art catalogue, and the only words are Barry's poem with my translation. Talk of innovating art criticism.

7:43 AM

Kevin said...

His way of writing is so different from mine that it makes me curious now why I like it so much! Maybe we enjoy the things we are ourselves incapable of pulling off--otherwise a trace of envy or contempt would cull our response to any particular work of art? I often start writing with a particular "thing" in mind, something I want to address for example, a vulgarity Barry professes himself wary of. And the poets I liked when I was 23 I don't like any more. Most of my favorites I discovered after I turned 30. And often I stop in the middle of a poem, upset because I have found, "This isn't sentimental \*enough.\*" He is an amazing writer I'm glad you are showcasing, Tom. Keep up the good work.

10:50 PM

Barry Schwabsky said...

Thanks so much, Anny. It was such a pleasure to work with you on that translation--discussing the shades of meaning of words: my idea of paradise. Maybe that text, "Diary of a Poem," would have been a better example to use for explaining my working methods. Again, it began while I was traveling: a poem I wrote in a hotel room in Sao Paulo, Brazil. And just as Tephra doesn't say anything overtly about France, this poem didn't talk about Brazil. After working on it a bit, I thought that from one beginning it could go in two different directions, and I wavered between them. Eventually I realized it might be very interesting to have two poems that were identical for their first half, but different in their conclusion. So I did that--I chose both. One was the version for the left ear, the other was the version for the right ear. And I was quite happy with this idea. But in the back of my mind, I was never really 100% satisfied with either of the two poems. I liked them, and I considered them finished, yet there was also something that bugged me about them. They hadn't attained a certain fullness. But there they sat, and they even became part of a book manuscript that I was circulating. As Valery said, a poem is not finished but abandoned. But then, more than a year later, the idea came up of doing this book with the Italian painter Maria Morganti, an old friend. The book shows the development of a single small painting: each right-hand page shows a photograph taken of the painting each day that she worked on it. So the book is a kind of diary of the painting, and I thought it would be worth trying to create a fiction of a similar sort of diary, but of a poem. And somehow or other it occurred to me that in those two poems, which already between them contained the idea of something being reworked, there was material that could be developed further in that sense. So I started playing with the material from both poems, repeating, recombining, adding, varying--using repetition with variations as a way to convey the sense of a single thing developing through time with revision and reconsideration.

4:46 AM

Anny Ballardini said...

And it is an excellent example. A pity I did not know this story before. I think it is a question of shyness but maybe when translating I should ask specific questions: what did you mean, when did you write this poem, why. Fact is that I'd feel like invading the personality of the Other, a sort of Pornography as Gombrowics defined it in his homonymous book.

Better, I can ask questions when they are technically tied to a specific word or phrase. Maybe I should develop a set of questions pivoting on the method used by the Author, that could be an idea, as Tom asked Barry.

12:52 PM

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