

# H. L. Hix In Conversation with Frank Bidart

This summer, esteemed poet Frank Bidart joined fellow poet H. L. Hix for a conversation about formal structures in poetry at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison New Jersey. Tears were shed as both interviewer and interviewee wrestled with the profundity of influence, mutual admiration and the sublimity of alienation. Then they moved on to craft and—not surprisingly—psychology. In 1975 Bidart wrote the long poem “Ellen West,” based on a dusty old phenomenological psychology case history he’d read in college about an anorexic woman. Bidart explains here how he relies on intellectual structures to approach intimate emotional subjects, and narratological techniques to mimic the psyche. Somehow all of that adds up to one of my favorite lines of poetry ever written—from Frank Bidart’s poem “Ellen West”: “Only to my husband I’m not simply a ‘case.’ / But he is a fool. He married / meat and thought it was a wife.” —M.P.

**H. L. HIX: I’d like to start this interview by asking you about something you said in another interview. Your volume of collected poems, *In The Western Night*, includes an interview conducted by Mark Halliday, in which you say, “If you can create a structure that is large enough or strong enough, anything can retain its own identity and find its place there.” You and I are speaking now before a community of writers. Do you think of your remark as a charge to all of us as writers:**

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\*This conversation was recorded live at Fairleigh Dickinson University at Florham on August 5, 2009. Frank Bidart appeared as a guest at the MFA in Creative Writing summer residency.

**to create structures that are large enough and strong enough?**

FRANK BIDART: That's a kind of ideal. I grew up in the generation where the Mahler symphonies were first widely experienced and known. These first stereo recordings made Mahler more accessible . . . you could hear much more than you could in the mono recordings of the forties and fifties. Mahler is a kind of an aesthetic model. I mean, he could include folk songs, he could include a sense of nature, of cowbells, and yet build very intense emotional structures in which all these things seemed relevant. They're not local beauties; they're not distractions, or entertainments along the way. They are part of a vision of the world and a vision of one's own nature in which they have their place.

**HLH: So it's a form of realism you are pursuing? It's not the way we normally apply the term "realism," but you describe the poem as letting things retain their own identity, rather than transforming them into something else.**

FB: *Realism* applies because it starts with an experience of either oneself or the world or of oneself in the world that acknowledges the power of these things. For example, I love Maria Callas. She's my favorite singer. I'm obsessed with Maria Callas. In "Ellen West" I felt so lucky to be working on a poem in which suddenly there could be a passage about Maria Callas. In which I could say things that in fact I think are true, but I couldn't say in my own voice, because I couldn't quite justify them. Whereas if the person talking is Ellen West, who is anorexic, she has a certain drastic sense of possibilities, of the dominating issues, and this gives her a severe insight into Callas' life. I think what she says in the poem is true, though it's not the kind of thing you can put in a scholarly article. It's realism insofar as it grows out of an authentic experience. Not just an aesthetic emotion; not something made up; not an "as if"—even though there's a fiction involved. Ellen West as a person did exist—but the crucial thing is not whether she literally existed, but that she corresponds to my sense of human experience, and the nature of human experience and the possibility of human experience. In the distinction between fancy and imagination that Wordsworth makes, I hope she's an act of imagination, not fancy.

**HLH: Ellen West's anorexia is an explicit subject of the poem. But if we're pursuing this version of realism, it sounds like the real stakes are that what is *real* in the poem and what has its identity there is not so much a *thing* in the world as a person, a value, an ideal. I'm thinking of the passage in which she is described as an uncompromising soul. That sounds like an obligatory ideal—we all should**

**be in some sense uncompromising—yet also a source of her self-destructiveness. Is that what you're trying to make real in the poem, what you want to retain its identity and find its place?**

FB: Yes. The poem is based on a case history by Ludwig Binswanger, from the first collection in English of papers in phenomenological psychotherapy, called *Existence*. When I was an undergraduate at the University of California at Riverside, I belonged to a book club, the Reader's Subscription. As a member, I got this book, which I certainly had never heard of, in the mail. When I read around in it and read the case of Ellen West—there was a tremendous identification on my part. I had never been anorexic, but I was heavier before I began graduate school, and I had always hated it. I was certainly obsessed with food, and with both losing weight and eating. I found a mirror in the case of Ellen West. She was at the mercy of this desire not to have a body, in a way that I have felt too—but never with as imperious necessity as she did. I grew up a Catholic, with Catholicism's fundamental sense that there is a war between the mind and the body, between the spirit and the body. The case of Ellen West allowed me to see this more sharply. I felt it was profoundly common and human . . . not in specifically religious or Catholic terms. I right away wanted to write a poem about her, and had no idea how to, and certainly couldn't then. Fifteen years later, after I published my first book, I was writing a series of poems about the mind-body problem. And it suddenly occurred to me that I could understand the case of Ellen West in relation to the mind-body problem.

When the case of Ellen West was at the level of anorexia—eating, not eating, being obsessed with food or not being obsessed with food—I couldn't deal with it. Most poets start on the ground with very particular experience and details. I seem to need the opposite. I need an intellectual framework that allows me to move down from the large categories to specifics. Again, I'm not offering that as a model for anyone else, I think that's the nature of my mind. I'm a very bad observer of the world. After I leave here, if someone were to ask me what people looked like—I would be able to say something about the feeling in the room, perhaps the emotions. I couldn't *describe* anybody. I couldn't say, "Oh, there was somebody in a red jacket." I do not observe the world well. I notice eyes. I notice expressions, the way people talk, and their affect. One reason I'm not a novelist is I don't understand people and events through the clothes they wear and the literal actions they perform.

In any case, once I had the mind-body problem as a category, and I felt it as real, not simply a theoretical issue—then, I could go back to this material that I had read so long before and experience it again. I read it very, very slowly over

months. Binswanger was one of the first people to apply phenomenological insights to psychotherapy. And so I tried hard to absorb not only the narrative in terms of the details of her life but in terms of the intellectual categories and central ideas. I felt I could embody them in the poem in ways that very immediately were dramatic and had to do with fate. . . . I was imagining a book that began with the narrative of somebody who loses his arm in an auto accident. The poems in the middle were about my mother, and the book was to end with Ellen West. The first poem, about the guy who loses his arm, in many ways ends very positively. There's a sense of his new understanding of himself, and his identity, as having been created by this event, this accident, his own sense that in fact it changed and deepened him rather than destroyed him. Whereas Ellen West kills herself in the end. She's somebody who enacts, lives out, these problems, dilemmas, and cannot resolve them, or resolves them by leaving the earth.

So the book I was imagining began and ended with two opposite embodiments of the war between mind and body. I wanted there to be something in the book about the mind-body problem and art. Ellen West was herself a poet, but she saw herself as a failed poet. Then it occurred to me, she can think about Callas—who in life enacted many of the same issues, but was a great artist. At one point, Callas lost sixty pounds. Some of her fans said she had swallowed a tapeworm. It radically changed her ability to perform certain roles. There are great photographs of her as Violetta in *La Traviata*, which would have been very different if she had been as heavy as she had been six months earlier. Her voice undeniably changed in the process. It was part of the progressive . . . diminishment of her voice, and her ability, therefore, to be an artist. . . . Though it also allowed her to communicate certain things that she couldn't have with more voice. Seeing this was thrilling; suddenly, making art was in the mix of the mind-body problem.

Let me add one more thing. As a graduate student, I had taken a course in Yeats, who talks about the “anti-self,” about the usefulness of including an anti-self in the work of art—which is to say, someone who is all the things that one is not. By giving voice to what one is not, one understands oneself by confronting one's shadow. Embedding a small narrative about Maria Callas into a larger narrative about Ellen West, where many of the same issues are enacted, many of the same problems about having a body, one's relation to the body, the relation between art and having a body—yet things come out differently for each of them. It's what Shakespeare does when he uses a double plot. I think it hugely enlarged “Ellen West” as a poem. In fact,

I have used the double plot in every long poem I have written since. It is the most useful structural principle I have ever learned for a long work of art.

**HLH: There's a connection now in my head between what you've said about Yeats' notion of the anti-self and your sense of the double plot. Going back to an even earlier poem, "Herbert White" . . . Herbert White, I trust, is not Frank Bidart?**

**FB:** No, thank God.

**HLH: Herbert White the serial killer is not Frank Bidart but an anti-self. Yet, there's a point in the poem where he says, "I wanted / to *feel* things make sense," which recalls for me an observation you made in the interview with Mark Halliday: you talk about using "the materials of a poem to think." Accustomed as we are to such definitions of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility," we typically think of the poem as a locus of emotion and feeling. But you're telling us it's a place of thinking, you're talking about the conceptual apparatus you bring into your poems, and you've had Herbert White speak of a thinking that's defined in terms of feeling—"to *feel* things make sense." Is that a web you can untangle for us, or should it stay tangled?**

**FB:** No, no, no. I hope I can. Let me just go back. With my second book and "Ellen West" I realized the usefulness of the double plot, which I'd heard about, but never really understood. Then, of course, I realized that I had done this in my first book—without using, to myself, the term.

My first book begins with a dramatic monologue called "Herbert White," about a necrophiliac and serial killer. The rest of the book goes on to talk about Frank Bidart growing up in Bakersfield, California.

In the structure of the whole book, Herbert White is that double plot, the mirror, the anti-self, and in many ways I see him as the opposite of the son in the book, who *is* me. When the son feels contradictions and conflict, he doesn't go out and murder someone, he goes to a shrink, and reads Aristotle and Schopenhauer, he goes to school. And I think that's a better way! The world I'm from is full of people who have to think the world all by themselves, who don't have those kinds of structures—shrinks, college, books—to help them think their life. There's a wonderful line in Elizabeth Bishop's "Crusoe in England," "homemade, homemade, but aren't we all?" We are all homemade, but the elements we find at home are different. Herbert White has to do it all by himself without any apparatus from cultural history, or intellectual

history. What he comes up with is profoundly destructive, and he can't live with himself. He has finally to believe someone else did it.

I think each of us craves the feeling that things make sense. We do things that make us *feel* things are making sense. But all of us experience all the time great contradictions in feelings. We love and hate the same person. We feel envy and scorn at the same time about the same things. How do we deal with these contradictions? Do we do something violent that seems to resolve them, or do we apply some set of ideas and structures that help us understand the contradictions and the cause of the feelings? Herbert White has no apparatus with which to do that.

The rest of the book is about the son trying to absorb such an apparatus. And after a series of poems about my parents and their lives, and my father's death, there is a translation of the opening of *The Aeneid*. Well, one of the things you find when you learn history is that it's not as if it is a series of triumphant apprehensions of how to live. History is a series of often catastrophic events. It is a vision of how terrible dramas were enacted, and that's partly what *The Aeneid* is. To gain a sense of history is *not* to live in a Disney World of solutions, but to enter into tragedy, into paradox, into histories of blood. In the process you are transformed, yet you still want things to feel as if they make sense, and you have many, many more elements that you bring to bear on that. At the end of the book, the son meets in a dream the monster figure, a stylized version of Herbert White.

**HLH: If I may follow through on the notion of paradox and contradiction. Paradox is crucial, it seems to me, to many of your poems. Your versions of Catullus, for example, such as the one in your most recent book, *Watching the Spring Festival*, always pose in condensed form their paradoxical, contradictory, impossible question.**

**FB:** Well, let me see. This is a two-line poem by Catullus, it's Catullus 85, that begins with "Odi et amo"—*I hate and I love*. And it's not—I hate this person and I love another person. But—I hate and I love the same object at the same time. This poem, which I first read in graduate school, compelled me tremendously, because it seemed to me the quintessential statement of ambivalence. My experience is that nothing is more fundamental to me than hating and loving at the same time. For me it is the great paradigm of my relationship to my mother, who I was tremendously attached to, and at war with. I think it's also true of the nature of the erotic objects of my life—to put it in the most antiseptic way I can think of.

He does it in two lines. Essentially, the Latin means: I hate and I love. You ask why? I don't know, but I feel it done to me. Then the last word is *excrucior*: and I am crucified. After Catullus, that word *crucified* has come to have such strongly Christian associations that it's a very hard word to use in English because the point here is not Jesus on the cross. It is something less everyday than a crucifix on the wall. It returns to a terrible sense of pain, afflicted pain, without any divine resolution or amelioration. And I immediately looked up every translation I could find. This is a poem that everybody fails at translating. I didn't like any of the versions I found! Ezra Pound, who's a very great translator—well, I don't like his version very much. It's quite good until the end, and then he just uses the word *ache*. "It beats me, I feel it done to me and ache." "And ache" just doesn't have any of the force of *excrucior*. And I felt, to do a version at all, I had to be very unliteral. It had to be what Robert Lowell calls an imitation rather than a translation. I've done three versions, and I hope that fact alone communicates that no version is adequate. It's got to be two lines. It's got to be short, epigrammatic, and cut like a knife. Yet, there's no single version in English that succeeds in that. Anyway, the third version I did is in my last book. It's not necessarily my favorite of my versions. Each version ends up emphasizing some different element of the two lines. What I think I'd lost earlier was the sense that what's tormenting Catullus is that he doesn't know *why*. How can it be that you both hate and love someone at the same time?

Anyway, this version is called "Catullus: Id Faciam":

What I hate I love. Ask the crucified hand that holds  
the nail that now is driven into itself, why.

. . . But it's only *a* version.

**HLH: Is there a correlation, then, between that experience—the contradictory, paradoxical experience—and our identity, itself paradoxical and contradictory? As in this passage from *Star Dust*, where you conclude a poem with italicized lines: "We / are darkness. We are the city // whose brightness blots the stars from night." It seems as if there's both a paradoxical, damaging identity and a paradoxical, damaging force from outside. Is it the fact, the presence, of *both* of those that makes us need to *feel* things make sense rather than *think* things make sense?**

**FB:** Of course the history of thought is a history of assertions about what is real. If thinking that things made sense was simply a question of speculation, there are all sorts of theories of why things are as they are. History is a series of postulates about

what is real and why we have the experience we do. I feel that any sense of what I am has to be built on an apprehension of these contradictions of feeling because that's almost the most fundamental thing I feel. The most intense attachment to my mother, for example. And the most intense sense that if I lived the life she wanted me to lead, I would be destroyed or devoured. Not everybody has that experience, but for me, it was fundamental. It could have to do with a lover—it could be any intense, grounding relationship that, I think, always entails some sense of contradiction and conflict. I can't build any image of who I am that isn't built on apprehending these states in my experience. It informs everything I understand about the world. I grew up a Catholic; I'm no longer, but I sense that the war between the mind and the body, the spirit and the body that is so fundamental to the Catholicism I experienced, is an analog to what I'm talking about. To emphasize contradiction is not to say that all things are fundamentally chaos. There are many ways in which we live with contradiction. We carry on, not just in the face of contradiction, but embodying the contradiction.

One reason people love poetry is that it is the arena in which such opposites can be held in a kind of suspension. There's still a theatre of feeling that is very strong and it is not blocked. Most dramas have to resolve everything by the end. Good poems don't do that. I think there's something truer about art that does not do that. It probably means that in the short run, it has a smaller audience, but I think people will keep coming back to it because they will find something truer to their experience.