A Conversation with John Hollander

Introduction and interview by Paul Devlin

John Hollander is Sterling Professor of English Emeritus at Yale University, where he recently retired after teaching for more than four decades. He was born in Manhattan in 1929, and was raised there. After earning his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Columbia University in 1950 and 1952, respectively, he went on to become a Junior Fellow of the Harvard Society of Fellows 1954-1957, and to earn his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1959.

His first volume of poetry was selected by W.H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets series and published by Yale University Press in 1958. Auden also wrote the introduction to this first volume, A Crackling of Thorns. Hollander went on to write many more volumes * *of some of the finest poetry in English.*

Like Auden, Eliot, Coleridge, and Pope before him, he is not only a virtuosic poet, but also a highly accomplished critic, writing ten books of criticism, dozens of articles for scholarly journals and popular magazines, and editing over twenty books **. *Hollander wrote in the introduction to The Poetry of Everyday Life, a selection of his essays and (perhaps under-appreciated) short fiction published in 1998, that early in his career he had in mind to be a poet and serious scholar the same way Wallace Stevens was a poet and an insurance company executive/lawyer, Eliot was a poet and a bank clerk/editor, and W.C. Williams was a poet and a doctor. This was accomplished remarkably. Hollander's criticism delves deep into the realms of aesthetics and betrays an enormous amount of reading. He is certainly as well-versed (no pun intended) in his artform as any artist has ever been.*

Hollander's poems span the full range of human emotions and must be counted among the most sophisticated productions of the human mind. His work is highly heterogeneous and cannot be summarized here. His poetry is urbane, but never decadent. It radiates with deep scholarly learning, but is never pedantic. On the contrary, his work is entertaining, in the "read this for fun, not just because it's good for you" sense. (Although they are good for you too, like all great art.) They are profoundly philosophical, playful, lighthearted, quite funny, dark, and serious. Often they can be mysterious and sublime, but each are the work of a master craftsman. His friends and admirers include some of the best poets of the twentieth century, among whom are Anthony Hecht and James Merrill. Hollander lives with his wife in Connecticut.

(This interview was conducted by email in March and April, 2003.)

Paul Devlin: *I know that artistic creation is never a mechanical process, but I was just wondering about when writing a poem, do you first have the idea for the "philosophical" content of the poem, and then fit the content into a verse form, or do you ever want to experiment with a verse form, and find ideas to fill it?*

John Hollander: I'm not sure what " 'philosophical' content" might be; in any case, there are scores of things that you might say a poem is "about"—just for a start: an old story, a new one, something heard, something seen, something realized . . .and in all of these cases, some meaning to be discovered; an in all these cases, the "story" could be of persons, places, things—and the things themselves could be natural or crafted objects, or even structures or pieces of language itself . . . etc. Thinking about any of these could constitute the "start" or "origin" of a poem, often long before it begins to take shape. But that shape (size, scale, relation of sub-units to whole, aspects of its language, diction, syntax, relation of both of these to linear structure, the linear and strophic structures themselves—whether in or adapting a recognizable "verse form" or evolving a new one) can be among the "somethings" that a poem starts with. If I am in the midst of a sequence of poems with some evident relation to each other, with a formal or rhetorical bond among them, I may *know* what shape and what size the next one will be—perhaps just the way you *know*, in a stanzaic poem, something about he size and shape of each successive stanza. Sometimes the desire to do something with a particular size or shape may precede other points of departure. But in all cases, the poetic

nature of what is finally done depends on a mutual interpretation of the "form" with what you call the "content" (a distinction often made, but which I don't like to use).

PD: *Do you see good poetry, or poetry as a fine art, threatened by the internet, by explosions of communications in general? Do you think people have less time/strong attention spans to spend absorbed in a poem than they did even twenty, to say nothing of two-hundred years ago?*

JH: I'm more worried about people's ability to pay *informed* attention—to be able to listen to—rather than merely hear—music, for example; to be able to detect and be negatively affected by specious argument and deception in public speech of all kinds; to know any history and geography; to understand not only something about science but about explanation in general; to read and speak foreign languages—in short, about the fate of knowledge in a discursive world that ignores or suppresses it and can deal only with what it calls "information". When you have *educated* readers, good poetry will take care of itself.

PD: *I was thinking that perhaps* Rhyme's Reason *may help "rescue" good poetry, by making it less daunting for people to try verse in traditional forms, instead of writing any-old-thing and calling it poetry. Was this something you had in mind when you wrote the book?*

JH: Certainly. But it should be made clear that "traditional forms" include a variety of systems of verse, not merely accentual-syllabism. The very different modes of free verse written by Matthew Arnold and Walt Whitman and, still over a hundred years ago by William Ernest Henley and Robert Louis Stevenson and Stephen Crane are certainly "traditional forms". Most people can't read and hear and see poetry because they've been trained not to by bad teachers in a wretched educational system generally. I wrote the book to provide amusing examples of what different elements of verse could do in isolation and together, hoping that teachers and self-teachers (and people who write are always those to a degree) would find it useful.

PD: I *think* Rhyme's Reason *is not only an indispensable guide to English verse, but a work of art in and of itself, certainly a work of great humor and imagination. Can you give a brief history of why you wrote it, or how the idea(s) to write it came to you?*

JH: I'd originally written quite a few of the self-descriptive examples in the first edition of *Rhyme's Reason* as an appendix to the poetry section of a freshman reader I'd edited with Irving Howe and David Bromwich. But the wonderful acquisitions editor for literature at Yale University Press at the time (1980) had suggested that I could write many more of them and make them into a more comprehensive handbook. Thinking of my own students, and of how there was no such guide to the varieties of verse in English to which I could send them and that would help teach them to notice things about the examples presented—to see *how* the particular stanza or rhythmic scheme or whatever was being used by the particular words of the particular poem, for example—I got to work and with a speed which now alarms me produced a manuscript for the first edition of the book. I've never had more immediate fun writing a book.

PD: *What is your take on the interconnectedness of all the arts? I think I have noticed in your work that poetry is often considered in its relation to other art forms. Is it important for any artist to have a knowledge of other art forms?*

JH: I've written so extensively about various kinds of relations between poetry and music and poetry and visual art and architecture that I can't begin to rehearse it all here. Let me just say a few things about how my own music and art enter the world of my own poems. I've come to realize that my earliest exposure to the stuff of poetry was in song as well as in the verse I knew as a child—Milne, R.L. Stevenson, Kipling verses in the *Just So Stories* and the *Jungle Books*. My father played the piano and my mother liked to sing, and I grew up with songs in German, French and English in my ear and in my head and heart as well. I was always delighted by the interplay of verse and musical setting, although I couldn't have explained then what precisely delighted me each time. Then as I got older, I began to hear and notice things in the music itself. Music has always been very important to me, and knowing it well has helped me to try to avoid

trivial or silly or just plain misleading analogies between elements of music and those of poetry. I've enjoyed writing texts for composers to set, opera libretti, etc.

As for art, I've loved painting and drawings and prints since I was very young as well; and I'd go so far as to say that what I see in a painting is for me as much part of nature as what I see when I look out the window. And the ways I look at one influence the ways I look at the other. And not being a philosopher, I've had to work through my feelings and puzzlements about all this in my poems.

PD: *When you wrote "I'd go so far as to say that what I see in a painting is for me as much part of nature as what I see when I look out the window.", it reminded me of something that Borges once said in an interview: "Why shouldn't 'MacBeth' be as real for us as this morning's newspaper?"*

JH: Exactly! I've said to my students for decades now that the *Odyssey* is as much part of nature for me as the Aegean sea.

PD: *Would you mind describing what your relationship was with Jorge Luis Borges, both personally and artistically? I know you translated, at his request, his poem on the Golem of Prague, and responded with your own poem/letter, "reporting to him a Borgesian coincidence". What was his influence on your work and did any of your ideas or approaches change after reading his work?*

JH: Joyce—I first started reading him in high-school—was the first great twentieth-century writer of prose whose work influenced, I feel, my sense of the possibilities of poetic language. Borges and the Nabokov of *Lolita* (I wrote the first review of it in the United States, from a copy that Nabokov had given Harry Levin) I both read with a kind of recognition—a feeling that I, without knowing it, had imaginative business with them before we'd "met". (I indeed met them both, literally, but that's not what I mean—I'm speaking of those intense encounters in the space of a page). Before reading Borges, I'd always felt the power and necessity for me of recursion—of reflexivity; I couldn't put a name to it until I encountered it in mathematical logic in my mid-twenties, and only read Borges, one of whose basic tropes it was, until some years after that. But part of my imagination felt completely at home with his fictions. As I continue to do.

PD: *How do you go about writing a pattern poem? Do you meditate on a shape, perhaps a symbolic shape, to do you meditate on a subject and then find a shape to express it? (I realize this is quite similar to question #1.)*

JH: I've described in detail—in the second (1991) edition of *Types of Shape* the way I got started writing these emblems and the way they continued to be written (I haven't done any in many years, nor do I plan to again). I would think of the representation of some object in silhouette—a silhouette which wouldn't have any holes in it—and then draw the outlines, fill in the outlines with typewriter type (elite—or Courier in MS Word later on) and then contemplate the resulting image for anywhere from an hour to several months. The number of characters per line of typing would then give me a sort of metrical from for the lines of verse, not syllabic but graphematic (as a linguist might put it). These numbers, plus the number of indents from flush left, determined the form of each lines of the poem. The contemplation led to a decision about what the poem would decide for itself the object depicted in and by the poem's own form really "meant".

PD: *You wrote in the introduction to the new edition of* Reflections on Espionage *that whenever you have been "free of political callowness" it was partly as a result of reading W.H. Auden, George Orwell, and George Bernard Shaw. Do you think these writers might possibly be an antidote to political callowness that exists in much contemporary literary criticism?*

JH: If not they, then some other writers who can help one develop within one a skepticism strongly intertwined with passion, so that each can simultaneously check and reinforce the other. It provides great protection from being overcome by blind, true-believing zeal and corrupting cynicism (which may be two sides of the same false coin). Shaw was a great teacher for many in my generation. I started reading him when I was in sixth grade, and I responded strongly not only to the wit but to various modes, scene and

occasions of argument and debate as they were framed by various kinds of dramatic situation. I remember being electrified when quite young by the moment in the epilogue scene of *Saint Joan* when the English chaplain, De Stogumber, who had been so zealous in urging for Joan's being burned at the stake, returns to testify about how seeing her suffering the flames had made a changed man of him. The Inquisitor, Peter Cauchon calls out (with what I imagined was a kind of moral distaste I'd never been aware of before), "Must then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those who have no imagination?" It introduced me to a skepticism about the self-satisfaction of the born-again, of any persuasion. With Auden and Orwell, much later on and after my mental world had become more complicated, it was education in negotiating a living way between a destructively naïve idealism and the crackpot realism—equally inimical to the pragmatic.

PD: *Would you consider yourself a "formal" pragmatist, i.e., a student of Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead (etc.) or an "informal" pragmatist - someone taking the common-sense position on events...or someone who refuses to be pigeon-holed politically?*

JH: "Informal" – of the sort that often leads me to ask of theoretical formulations, "Yes, but what's it *for*?"

PD: *Which other authors do you think might help us negotiate between "naïve idealism" and "crackpot realism"? I think of Joyce, Wallace Stevens, perhaps Faulkner?*

JH: When I was in college, a strong teacher for just this question was Cervantes. One feels, in an Emersonian* way, that the Don's view of the world is correct at midnight, and Sancho's at noon.

PD: *You've written several books of poems, or long sequences of poems, that are coherent wholes, such as* Reflections on Espionage, Tesserae, Types of Shape, Powers of Thirteen, *and* Spectral Emanations. *This seems like a daunting task. What analogies, if any, do you see between the poet who attempts such vast and complicated works, and the epic poet of old, or perhaps the novelist? And is* Reflections on Espionage *especially related in anyway to the epistolary novel?*

JH: Let me start with the easier question first: I'd say that *Reflections on Espionage* was rather a sort of epistolary poem, lyric—in that there was only one speaker (letter-writer) as opposed to several, as in prose fiction. Had I written the responses sent back by "Lyrebird", "Image", "Grusha", etc., then it might have been more like an epistolary novel. On the larger issue, I suppose that I'm still prone to modernist convictions about long poems—that extensive narratives in verse seem unlikely, and that "book-length poems" have to be sequences of shorter ones. Not just collections but true sequences, in which the poetry of the whole is in good measure a function of the relations among the parts. Of the books of mine you've just mentioned, I'd say that *Types of Shape* is a collection, (the longish poem entitled "Spectral Emanations", the italicized title is that of the book that contains it—and such is the case with "The Tesserae") but that the others are indeed sequences. There are also the two sequences, one ("In Time") of very personal lyrics all in the "In Memoriam" stanza and the other of prose poems ("In Place") with a strange somewhat Poe-like (or maybe somewhat Borgesian) fiction called "In Between" sandwiched in, in the book entitled *In Time and Place*. But I think that of these, only *Reflections on Espionage* has any possible relation to anything a novelist might do. I wrote about 100 pages of a novel when I was in my twenties, but abandoned the project. I think that I avowed my inabilities in a poem—again, somewhat Borgesian-called "Collected Novels", in which the speaker, a novelist who has published eleven works of fiction, each under a different pseudonym, acknowledges his authorship, describing each of the novels in a separate stanza.

PD: *Do you think this approach to book-length approach poetry is dying out or is it alive and well? I think of some fine contemporary examples of this style being* Brother to Dragons *by Robert Penn Warren and* Garbage *by A.R. Ammons – how do you see long works such as these in relation to your own books and can you suggest any others as models for a young poet who might want to attempt such a project?*

JH: Many more poets have been attempting "long" poems—book-length ones—today than in the past half-century or more. Any young poet thinking of a book-length poem should certainly have read a good

number of them—not only the great monuments in our language such *as The Canterbury Tales, The Faerie Queene, Paradise Lost, The Prelude, Song of Myself, In Memoriam, Idylls of the King, The Ring and the Book*[*], but the modern ones. I mean *The Waste Land, Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, The Man with the Blue Guitar, The Bridge, The Age of Anxiety, The Sea and the Mirror, The Changing Light at Sandover*[**], Kenneth Koch's hilarious *Ko, or a Season on Earth*. I don't think E.A. Robinson's long Arthurian are of much help (his great poetry is all in the short ones, save for the short story in verse called "Isaac and Archibald"). But a young poet might well read Robinson Jeffers' *Roan Stallion* and *Tamar*. Quite recently, W.S. Merwin published a brilliant long narrative poem, *The Folding Cliffs*—narrative isn't impossible, after all.

PD: *Would you also include Derek Walcott's* Omeros *and Joseph Brodsky's* Gorbunov and Gorchakov *on that list?*

JH: Yes.

PD: *Are there any great poets, from any time period, who you feel are overlooked today?*

JH: I'm afraid this is a complicated question: [A] Overlooked by whom? People who teach literature in colleges and universities? Critics of literature outside of universities? (There are few of these any more who have read very much.) "Common readers"? This may also be a dying race. Novelists and playwrights? And [B] how "great" do you mean?—The word is flung about so much that it seems merely to mean "very good"? Browning seems to me to be one of the great poets in English, but I don't know how much he is read and discussed today—there are at most two or three really good books about him. And finally, there's a problem with "overlooked"—all sorts of people might want to drop Dante's name without being able to quote a single tercet or even line. Some people might remember a line or two from Chaucer, but they couldn't be said to *know* either *The Canterbury Tales* or *Troilus and Criseyde*. Victor Hugo's greatness as a poet has been implicitly denied—but to no avail—since the later nineteenth century. Emerson and Melville are, as major poets, second only to Whitman and Dickinson in nineteenth-century America; but I don't know how many people acknowledge this. Longfellow is far more interesting and important than he has been given credit for since WWI. Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti are very very strong poets. Shelly is great; so is the D.H. Lawrence of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and some of the other later poems. Are they "overlooked"? Perhaps. Hardy's greatness as a poet has been emerging steadily among truly discerning readers since the mid-twentieth century. I could go on and on about this without more precise definition of the terms in question.

PD: *One of my favorite sonnets from* Powers of Thirteen *is number 97, "The Old Tale":*

No sun shone for so long during that long summer that
Candles everywhere in the land burned with a gray flame.
Gold had become dull, and lead like tar, and the demesne
Of sunny meadows shivered under a foreign reign;
Master craftsman downed their tools halfway through every piece
Of work, not for enjoyments, but to start on the next
Slightly inferior one; the standard musical
Pitch wandered through a major second from town to town,
And as for numbers, weights and measures – But then you came
Surveyed the hopeless scene, and, yawning, closed the Big Book
In which all this had been written, shelved it heavily,
And wrote a laughing letter to the whole afternoon
Of great enterprise and beauty (yesterday, this was).[*]

Is it titled "The Old Tale" because it's an old story of a land re-awakened by the arrival of a princess, or a person by a love-interest, or a mind *re-awakened by a* text*? Or is there another precedent for this poem's title?*

JH: Thanks for reminding me of this one—I haven't said it aloud at a reading for almost 20 years, and I'd almost forgotten it. Getting it out and reading it over, I was delighted to find that it worked on me just as I hope it would on a careful reader. Yes, I eventually called the poem "The Old Tale". All the titles were added only once I'd finished the whole sequence and arranged its order: I placed them below so that they'd be sub-titles both in an unusual, most literal sense and in the ordinary one, save that there were no titles which they followed or modified. They were more like glosses. I did indeed call this one "The Old Tale" because of the way the details of the bad time seemed, when I reread them, to be like those one of those *Märchen* or fairy-tales like those of Grimm or Perrault or Andersen. In this case, of course, it's the "You"—the principal personage in the whole sequence, and not Parsifal or a prince kissing awake the Sleeping Beauty who rescues the doomed or wakens the slumbering land. But "You" isn't a mere "love interest"—she's both internal and external, a muse, a companion in colloquy, a silent partner, etc. Her entrance is like that of a poem itself onto a stage of torpid literalness.

PD: *Is all art, in a sense, part of an "attack" on "torpid literalness"? Is art a reminder that the universe is more than facts and figures?*

JH: It's no more an attack than a defense. But something beyond them both. Nobody needs art – but only his or her own senses – as reminder that "the universe is more than facts and figures". On the other hand, I recall a very powerful opening sentence of a well-known philosophical work* that maintains, very convincingly, that "The World is everything that is the case". This formulation would include everything else you'd want to say – for example, "I want to say right now that there's a precise shade of mauve that smells like B-Flat above midde-C." By Wittgenstein's formulation that sentence is part of the world and so is everything in it.

PD: *In terms of educational practice, what ways can a teacher, perhaps an elementary school or high school teacher, make good poetry exciting and accessible?*

JH: First of all, the teacher has to know and feel what poetry is, and be able—and this is crucial—to read it aloud effectively. Then, he or she can have students memorize excellent short poems and passages from longer ones, starting with set pieces from Shakespeare; for example, a Shakespeare sonnet or two. When the student recites the poem aloud in class, the teacher should comment on the intonation pattern, and the way in which the student may or may not have spoken the language meaningfully. Introduce students even in elementary school to the close reading of short poems—and, indeed, of passages of great prose. Every good teacher has his or her own way of bringing students' own limited but diverse experience of the world to bear on a text speaking of and from beyond it: but the rotten American educational system's obsessions with methodology don't acknowledge this, and tend among other things to stifle originality in teachers. The way good teachers can get a handful of students (there'll probably not be any more than that) to possess themselves of something in poetry is in a way as creative and imaginative act as writing poems themselves.

PD: *Regarding your comments on the state of the American educational system, what would be some of your suggestions for reform?*

JH: I think it's hopeless. What like to call "the Educational-Industrial Complex" – the noxious relations among schools of education, state accreditation administrations and teacher's unions has stood in the way of any reform for a half-century at least.

PD: *Might there be a formula or characteristics for describing/defining a great poem similar to Sir Henry Wotton's definition of great architecture having three conditions: "commoditie, firmeness, and delight"? Should a great poem have any similar set of qualities?*

JH: If "delight" is broadly enough construed—to equal what Wordsworth meant by "pleasure" in the *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads*—then I'd have to say that the only legitimate "commoditie" of poetry is that of its "delight" itself. Poetry can teach, of course—in a way, it has to—but its lessons aren't didactic. Auden famously said that "poetry makes nothing happen":, but it *does* make things happen to and in human

consciousness. "Firmemess"—well, there might be an analogue there in all of what we mean by the "soundness" of a poem. Does it fall apart structurally, musically, logically (in whatever the particular poetic logic of its own happens to be); is its authenticity stable? I think a great poem has to exhibit some version of sublimity—either height or depth –and it has to do such things to and with language as to alter it somewhat for anyone who can really read. And I think it probably has to be powerfully mythopoetic in some way.

PD: *In your 2001 article "The Rhetoric of Consciousness", you wrote that "Some altered states tend to become what our inadequate discourse says they are, while yet remaining untouched by it, and causing us to feel, without really sufficient cause, that language continues to fail us in some profound way". I think of the relationship between a poet trying to represent an altered-state in language not adapted to it, and Plato's story of the cave. I was thinking that your article might help us read Plato's story in a new way. Perhaps it is a parable about the inadequacy of language to explain altered states?*

JH: The general questions lying behind this one about Plato have been the concern of so much analytic philosophy from Wittgenstein on that I'd hesitate to make any casual statement in the light of them. But I've never thought about the problems consequent upon the inhabitants being led out of Plato's cave as linguistic ones. On the other matter—of poetic language and inner states—I've always felt that it can really say more about some inner states (but not others) than a notion of language as "describing" or "defining" them would allow. But again, that's a very large matter to explore.

PD: *What are you working on now? Is there a* Collected Poems *on the way?*

JH: My new book is called *Picture Window* and it's being published by Knopf in May. I'm revising into a short book the Clark Lectures which I gave at Trinity College, Cambridge, three years ago (they're about the trope of shadows in poetry in English), and putting the finishing touches on an anthology – with extensive commentary – of writing about cats as well as collecting some essays I've written in the past on some relations between poetry and music. The question of a *Collected Poems* hasn't come up yet.

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