

Fall 1990

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Richard Hugo

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Recommended Citation

Hugo, Richard and Rice, Paul (1990) "An Interview: Richard Hugo," *CutBank*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 34 , Article 27.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss34/27>

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An Interview: Richard Hugo

The following is a short interview with Richard Hugo, conducted by Paul Rice when Hugo was giving readings and workshops in Western North Carolina in November, 1980.

- Rice In the last ten to fifteen years, poetry has gotten to be big business.
- Hugo It hasn't gotten to be big money.
- Rice Everybody wants to write a poem. The lyrical instinct has come out in us. I have always been at odds to explain this especially in a decade, the seventies, when in a very real way we seem to be more Philistine than we have ever been. Can you posit any reasons?
- Hugo I think we're just a big country with a big population, and we can accommodate the Philistines and the poets both. I would put in a plug for American poetry. I'm not up on all the art forms, but I wouldn't doubt that any art form is in better shape than American poetry. I think that good poems are being written by more good poets than at any time in our history. It seems that there must be several hundred very good poets in the United States, and well over a hundred of those are firmly established and doing a good job. For instance, I wish the art of the movie was in as good shape as American poetry.
- Rice I guess this implies that we have more bad poets than ever too?
- Hugo Of course there are those who try and it just doesn't seem to be their thing.
- Rice As a teacher of poetry workshops, I get a lot of poems that are obvious cries for help, poems that say, "Hey, listen to me—I hurt." I'm talking about a genre of highly personal confessional poetry which seems to have been used by writers more for therapeutic purposes than for artistic ones. I can never bring myself to tell these people what I really feel and that is that they should have left the poems under their mattress. Often the workshops have

a tendency in turning into group gropes where "I show you mine and you show me yours."

Hugo I don't believe in any kind of art as therapy, not the doing of it. Perhaps painting pictures in hospitals or something might be of some help, but I think of therapy as medicine. I don't think that writing a poem is going to make oneself any healthier mentally. I think those are medical problems and would best be left to medical doctors.

Rice In speaking of the people who want to talk about their personal life in workshop. I have never figured out what to tell them.

Hugo In some ways, it's not a bad impulse. There are two things that are necessary to be an artist, one is a kind of hammy instinct, a wanting to show off. I think that lies in most artists somewhere. The other is that to do it, there is a certain amount of generosity involved. I think that the best artists are quite generous by nature. So, the instinct itself to do it is not necessarily a bad thing. The only problem is that some want to satisfy that instinct quite often with a minimum of work. They want to do it directly with "oh, look at me," and not follow up with something that truly is a more creative thing.

A poem is a thing made. That's what it means in the Greek. The cry is not enough. You have to go out and make something. If you're not making anything, if you're just crying out; that isn't going to last, nor be very satisfying to the artist. The artist will always be unfulfilled.

Rice No one would think of buying a violin and 30 days later, giving a concert. But people who have never written before will pick up a pen and expect everyone to read, and furthermore, to like it.

Hugo Wendell Berry said something like that in Montana. He said that you would never dream of walking into a musician's office with a violin and say, "I don't know how to play these things but I have lots of beautiful tunes in my head, would you mind listening to them for a while?" But, they do this to poets all the time.

- Rice Have you ever told a young poet to hang it up?
- Hugo No, I would never presume to do that. You're judging the durability of the person's impulse to write, and you don't know how deep that goes. You can't ever evaluate that. A poet may look absolutely awful, but perhaps inside that poet is some resolute will to do it. That writer will stick to it for 30 years if she or he has to until he or she can do it. You don't know if that lies inside them or not.
- There are, by the way, some very good writers in the United States today that probably could have been told to hang it up. I don't know about poets, but Bernard Malamud, the fiction writer, had very little talent for language, no wings so to speak. He taught freshman composition for ten years at Oregon State College. His need to write was so strong that he just sat down and taught himself to write so that he could get his fiction out. So, I would never say, "Hang it up," to anyone. That's so presumptuous. I suppose teachers can say that if they want to, but it's arrogant. I've told poets they're not writing very well, and that if they don't write better, the chances of them becoming a poet and getting anything published are almost nil. That's another matter then, I'm speaking of the things at hand. I wouldn't presume to make that profound a judgment of anybody. You just don't know what lies in people.
- Rice Where do you think that politics should enter the art of poetry?
- Hugo You mean poetic politics?
- Rice Let's try feminist politics for starters. This is a political force that has certainly helped shape poetry in the recent decade.
- Hugo I believe that anything that obsesses one, that would be feminist politics as well as triggering towns,* if the obsession is real enough, it can be accommodated by the imagination, and if they do, then certainly they're quite valid material for poetry or constitute a valid process for poetry.
- I tend to think of politics as being oversimplifications, of necessity. You have to stand with this or that party; you have to take this or that stand on each issue. I think of

art as being more complex than that, that it can accommodate different shades of truth that political thinking cannot. If you get too subtle with political thinking, there would never be any results. You have to be so singular minded to get things done. That's true with feminist politics. If those engaged in it keep their eye on the ball and try to achieve true equality, then they have to ignore subtle businesses that men and women get into with each other where they alternately play roles dominating each other. Sometimes the man feels weak and wants the woman to mother him, or the woman feels weak and wants the man to father her. These things really do go on between the sexes in marriage and all the time. These things have to be overlooked in favor of the special goal that the people want.

**The Triggering Town* is Hugo's book of essays on the art of poetry. A "triggering" subject is anything which "causes" the poem to be written."