

## An Interview with Frank Bidart

*This interview was conducted at the Prairie Restaurant in downtown Chicago on Saturday, October 16, 1999.*

ANDREW RATHMANN: For me, and I'm sure for many others, one of the pleasures of your poetry is its rhetorical intensity—by which I mean the absence of irony, and your willingness to venture grand statements about life, death, guilt, desire, and so forth. I find this aspect of your work thrilling. But as you know, there is a strong climate of opinion these days that finds such statements either naïve or embarrassing in some way, whereas you are not embarrassed.

FRANK BIDART: Unembarrassable! Well—

AR: I don't want to ask you, "Why aren't you an ironic poet?" But I would like to know what you make of the turn toward irony, or toward a cooler and more cerebral kind of writing.

FB: We live in an armored age. There has come to be astonishing sophistication in producing an armored self on paper—in a way that makes the poems that were “armored” twenty years ago look positively candid and naïve. And I think it’s a trap, I think it’s a terrible trap. Frost says, quoting Horace, “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.” There’s a kind of power that art can have—that the art I most love has—that you can’t have if everything is presented from an ironic perspective. “Ironic perspective” doesn’t say it—from a point of view where the work, as I say, is infinitely protected, but also closed, and doesn’t venture connections to the vagaries and range of the emotional life. Maybe I should put it this way: If you can’t tell when something goes wrong in a work, that this line is bad or this move wrong, you also can’t tell when there’s something right. There’s a kind of power in writing that has a building sense of a center, that then opens the writer to the objection that something has gone wrong, something has not fulfilled itself, something has not developed from the poem’s spine. Without risking that, you can’t have the kind of decisive and powerful rightness that I crave as a reader.

There is an ancient tradition in Western art—and I say Western because I don’t truly know other kinds of art—in which you can talk about a central action in a poem or a play or an epic. You experience its center in terms of that action, and you can think about—you can talk about—how successful it is in relation to the fulfillment of that action.

DANIELLE ALLEN: Is there an ambiguity in the phrase “a building sense of center”? When you first used it, I understood something about the poet’s own commitment to the world and to a particular interpretive focus that the reader would have to identify in order to assess the poetry.

FB: I mean the Aristotelian sense of action. It “builds” in the sense that it has a progress: it’s not simply “this event and this event and this event,” but the second event has some relation to the first, and both of those events affect what happens later; there’s an arc to the

action. There's a sense of *progressive learning about necessity*. Every work of art as it begins starts to define where necessity lies. Revelation in a work of art partly involves learning where necessity lies—what can't be done, what kills you, what doesn't "work." But among other things, I guess you have to believe in necessity. And I *do*, you know? I think there is a structure beneath things that one can fight, but the idea that it is not there is, I think, illusory. I don't believe we just sort of hop along on a shifting consciousness that has no patterns beneath it—free from patterns that continually get fulfilled. One thing that the kind of art I'm talking about wants to do is to move down through the shifting miasma of second-by-second impressions to the discovery of patterns beneath. The burden is not to come up just with pop psychology patterns, mere banalities or conventions. Or, better: to experience what has become cliché so freshly that you experience again its original force.

DA: Can language reproduce those patterns, or does it simply reveal them, disclose them? In "The Second Hour of the Night" [*Desire*, 1997], there are the bits where you talk about how desire is about delay and deferral and so forth. But you enact that in the poem, too, because we know what's coming, and you slow it down so much.

FB: I know, I know—it becomes a kind of agony, and you are both *terrified* of what's going to happen, and realize there is some awful *inevitability* to what's going to happen. To my mind the poem is a tragedy. There's no solution to Myrrha's life. It's not as if going to bed with her father solves anything: it does not. And *not* going to bed with the father didn't solve anything: she wanted to kill herself. There's a *radical given* to her life that she cannot change or get away from. Now, most of us are lucky: we don't feel such a curious, terrible radical given. Every tragedy starts from an irremediable radical given. Hamlet's father has been killed, and his mother has married the person who killed him. Finally, that is the thing that cannot be got around. He can delay, and delay, and delay. But there is no solution. You might get lucky, and not get nicked by the poison sword; just as there are people who have changed the end of *King Lear* and save Cordelia at the last minute. But that's to substitute chance for a deep working

out of the nature of the order of things. I think that there is an order of things. I don't mean that I simply *know* the order of things. But I feel that there are structures in my life that I don't just choose, and that a great deal of living is negotiating with them, negotiating one's way around them. They're there—you don't triumph over them by pretending they are not there.

AR: Do you think that irony might provide a way of living with those structures, and not seeing them as absolutely irremediable? Whereas a more absolutist style, that recognizes necessity, can only recognize contradiction and impasse?

FB: That's true. There are different kinds of irony; irony is not a bad word in my book. I was a student of Tom Edwards and Reuben Brower, and their emphasis on tone in a poem is an exploration of irony. Let's say there are ironies that cut deep, and ironies that are finally boring because they seem predictable. Ironies that so armor the author that they are a dead end, a trap.

DA: I guess it is a question of whether one needs to make a distinction between irony and a lack of commitment to things. What about the idea of playfulness?—this is something that you were talking about before, Andy.

AR: Is there something to be said for poetry which is “open” and playful, and which grants the reader the freedom to construe meaning in collaboration with the author? Might this kind of poetry be valuable because its author does not need to be so authoritarian?

FB: First of all, I don't want to preclude any kind of writing. I'm not saying that “this shouldn't exist.” I am merely trying to keep a space for something that is actually very traditional—but whose power and necessity too often now seem unacknowledged, even about to disappear. “Authoritarian,” if you are talking about authors, is not a bad word! And partly I read Tolstoy, I read Dostoevsky because they have seen things that I haven't seen, and want to follow where they can

take me. That is not just a “power move” on their part.

The world is full of a million billion trillion things. If you put any kind of frame around something, and say, “I’m going to put *this* in my work of art,” that involves a choice. Anything that gets into a work of art, inevitably, takes on to some degree the status of emblem. Always; there’s no way around that. Now, you can have an aesthetic of chance, and say, “Ah, what’s in the frame? I didn’t really choose.” But then whatever is in the frame becomes an emblem of chance; you can’t just go on doing that forever. You’ve done it, or someone (John Cage) has done it: it’s not a discovery any more.

I wish there were more play in my own work. I adore Frank O’Hara’s work. It has a marvelous sense of the unpredictability of the moment, the enthusiasm and sweetness of the moment. I don’t know how to *do* that. I mean, I could imitate Frank O’Hara, but that would just be an imitation of Frank O’Hara. I don’t know how to do it in some deeper or more truly new way. There are lots of things that I wish I could get into my art that I haven’t. Shakespeare is of course the great emblem of abundance and unpredictability coexisting with design, neither strangling design nor smothered by design, by the spine of a profound central action... An art that says, “Oh, I’m not really going to be the author, and I’m not going to tell you what’s what”—it’s very hard for that art not to become boring, not to become repetitious. Unlike Shakespeare. The notion that only *we* know how hard it is to know anything seems to me naïve, arrogant, a snobbery.

Maybe my predilections as a reader were formed too long ago. I crave the experience I have when I read a great play—when I read *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, or *Oedipus*. (Or “Ode to a Nightingale” or “Lycidas” or “The Waste Land” or *Ulysses*, or watch *Akira*.) That sense of progressive coming into a vision of how things are. It’s no longer news that there is chance in the world, that things are daffy and unpredictable. Those are old discoveries. I’m not saying that I’m coming up with equivalent new discoveries. But at the moment of writing, I have the illusion that *this* has never quite been seen before, in *this* elemental configuration.

DA: Let’s talk about the idea of having the experience of a progressive “coming into a vision of how things are”: is that something that you

try to give to your readers? That is, are you thinking of language as working on a level that is giving people an experience that is felt, all the way through, and then is also about vision and cognition at the end of it?

FB: Or vision, ideally, all through that gets deeper as it progresses. Unachievable ideal.

AR: Is there a connection between your interest in getting at the subterranean truth of things and the outsider status of your characters? In “The Arc” [*The Book of the Body*, 1977], there is this line: “Insanity is the insistence on meaning.” So is there something isolating or exiling about this absolute sense of necessity?

FB: You can see necessity much more clearly if you’re an outsider. King Lear, when he’s in power, can’t see a damn thing. Everybody sucks up to him, and when people don’t suck up to him—when Cordelia doesn’t suck up to him—he can’t stand it. It’s very hard to see anything when you’re on top. People who can see how things are really ordered—they’re perhaps always a little outside it, or started as its victim; they can see the grinding beneath what may appear a smooth surface. That’s one reason that minorities, or being gay—at least there’s a possibility of seeing how things are. There’s also of course the possibility of being blinded by one’s anger and fury.

AR: Do you think of yourself as in some ways oppositional, in the sense of wanting to combat customary ways of feeling? In “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky” [*The Sacrifice*, 1983] and “Ellen West” [*The Book of the Body*, 1977], the main characters feel anger at other people for not seeing what they see. There’s that moment in “The Second Hour of the Night” where you say, “*O you who looking within the mirror discover in / gratitude how common, how lawful your desire, / / before the mirror / anoint your body with myrrh.*” I gather you are saying: take another look.

FB: Well, not only take another look, but absorb into you the thing

that the negative has experienced and represents. Because then you are going to see something central or crucial about the nature of the thing that you seem to have had no trouble with, but that you probably haven't seen very clearly. At Myrrha's most—you could say—paranoid moment, she says, "Her friends live as if, though what they / desire is entirely what they are / expected to desire, it is they who desire." It is not that the opposite of this is wholly true—it is not that they *don't* desire—but at some level, they don't understand the way in which it is not *simply* themselves desiring. They think, "Oh, *I'm* in love." They don't understand the things that have gone to make something that is easy for them, comfortable for them. The process can become all too delusional, because whatever they think they love so fits their image of what they should be. So it is not that it is *not* they who desire. But it is not simply they who desire. In this poem, and I guess I think in life, to realize that, you have to have experienced desire that you do not want to desire. To want what you do not want. Their outsider status very much has to do with how I perceive people perceiving things. As I said, this happens again and again in Shakespeare. Othello doesn't really know anything about his aide until Iago screws him royally, and then he learns something about Iago, and perhaps about himself.

DA: I'm curious about this relationship between outsider status, true seeing, and language as a medium. Do you, in your attempt to show those in power what can be seen from an outsider's perspective, have any sense of yourself as working with a language that such people use somewhat blindly, or a sense of yourself as revealing things about their own language to them?—I'm trying to locate your work in relation to contemporary American English. Do you relate your use of language to the everyday use of English or is it simply the accidental medium that you use for your project of seeing?

FB: I want my poems to include lots of levels of language—it's the only way to even begin to embody the nature of things. The end is only partly polemical: by somewhat upsetting expectations, you can make somebody see something. The use of the demotic is a crucial

part of this. At the beginning of “In the Western Night” [*In the Western Night*, 1990] there is this passage: “First, I was there where unheard / harmonies create the harmonies // we hear— // then I was a dog, sniffing / your crotch.” Well, “crotch” has got to be a little shocking in this context, and that’s central. A more decorous word would not suggest the joining of high and low, that we’re creatures who are interested both in crotches and in unheard harmonies. Language has to embody the fact that a smooth and harmonious set of orders does not lead from one to the other. I think probably the only longish poem I have written that is almost wholly in the demotic is “Herbert White” [*Golden State*, 1973]. I carried that as far as I could go. Because to live only in the demotic I think is a trap—the demotic has no language for the unheard harmonies, or an impoverished one. Other ways of perceiving are embodied by other kinds of language. So, as I say, I think it’s a trap to think only one kind of language is eloquent, or only one kind of language embodies what’s real. The unheard harmonies we hear and crave to hear are just as real as the crotch.

DA: Help us see the relationship between the different levels of language and an ability to see or reveal the order of things, that is, between the forms of elegance that you use to disclose what there is to see, and the demotic forms that we use in our everyday lives as we stumble around trying to see things. In the transition from demotic to elegance, do you give us new terms for seeing, or new expressions for the experience of seeing, or new positions from which to stand and look—the position of the anorexic, the position of Myrrha, and so forth?

FB: I don’t want to imply that I achieve all that, but ideally one would be able to do all of those things. Seeing is not a question of, “Now I’ve come here and I’ll tell you what I know.” Seeing is an experience, it’s moving through something, it’s going on a journey. It’s in the sudden juxtapositions, it’s the journey second to second—which is always finally unstatable. You can only approximate its meaning using ordinary speech, as one does in life: “I learned *this*.”



AR: You have said, “Frank had the illusion, when he talked to himself in the clichés he used when he talked to himself...” [“Borges and I”].

FB: And I do! I’ve got to use words when I talk to you, as Sweeney says [Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes”]. And I’ve got to use words when I talk to myself! And the words are pretty used up in some way.

DA: Do the words themselves ever lead you to see new things? This is the question of playfulness again, and an awareness that a word can suddenly change one’s experience of seeing.

FB: If I can find a phrase—a phrase or a line or two—that truly seems right, then I can see the thing I’m talking about much more clearly than before. That’s what I mean by embodiment. That is, words: you can’t just will them to embody the thing, but you can recognize it when it happens. A given phrase that may be the language you use with yourself about something you think you think, often is just dead as language when you see it on the page. Then you have to recognize that it’s a lie: or find some way of setting it down on the page that returns it to the original force that the phrase had in your head. More often than not I realize it’s shorthand, a stand-in, a convenient lie. When I *can* find a phrase or a few words that do seem alive on the page—that tells me something about the poem I’m trying to write, the shape of the emotion and movement at its center. The poem has begun.

DA: If the experience of coming to see felt more playful, would the degree to which one rendered it playfully change?

FB: Yes. And unfortunately for me, I think *for me* it usually doesn’t feel playful. It usually feels either static (the stasis of insight), painful—or both. I don’t think my experience of the sensation of insight comes to me through playfulness. If it did, maybe I could find a way to render that.

DA: Yesterday [in the colloquium] you said that if your experience were more ironized, maybe you would be a more ironic poet. Mark

Strand responded that there's a psychic space that has "Frank Bidart" written over it, and then you said "In blood!"—which is sort of ironizing.

FB: I know! One would have to be a fool not to see the absurdity in one's vehemences. One *also* has that relation to them. A grim playfulness. Not O'Hara's playfulness. I think it's the predominant tone in Nijinsky's voice in "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky."

When I'm in the psychic space of making the poem, I probably *always* feel that what I feel is ironized—but that doesn't mean cool in tone. Each feeling that is in contradiction to another feeling feels bitten into; my teeth remain in it.

AR: Do you think there's something characteristically American about this aspect of your work? It does seem that the desire to get to the bottom of things on one's own is a feature of American literature.

FB: The authors I most love certainly do that. I like extreme art. So much "middle-of-the-road" art is simply boring! What I'm saying about the kind of sophisticated armored writing we began by discussing, is that it actually feels very middle-of-the-road to me. Aping the manners of the cutting edge in the Twenties and Thirties, it risks nothing.

I think some of the homemade quality of my poetry is American. But the desire to get to the bottom of things, the sense that everything must be remade from the ground up, isn't only American. American writers don't do this more than Tolstoy—or more quirkily. But at my most egomaniacal I have no illusion that I will ever make something as radical as the authors I most love. I'm never going to write *War and Peace*, or *King Lear*. Would that I could.

DA: I was struck yesterday by the language of problem-solving that you use to talk about your work process. So I am going to present a problem to you: what would you say to someone who is trying to solve the problem of writing extreme poetry in the current context where a more understated or ironic approach does dominate maga-

zines? In some ways, irony has gotten as important as it has thanks to the Sixties and Seventies, when so many forms of belief were discredited or shown to be dangerous; so many people were reacting to false commitments that cost your life, as in Vietnam. So the need for irony seems to arise partly from a serious thought about the relation between ideas, passions, and politics. So this is the problem: if a young Frank now wanted to go for the jugular, how would he solve the problem of getting through the ironic context?

FB: First of all, let me go back to the matrix of ideals that skepticism comes out of. The people who refused to go to Vietnam also were putting their lives on the line. The fact is, you cannot get through life without putting your life on the line! There's no *other*, no "safe" way to live. On the other hand, I don't just adopt passionate positions and write poems out of them. The poems try to discover something, and I go through a journey—I go through the journey that the reader is going through. I may have a sense of where it has got to go, but I don't know how it's going to get there. And I may be very unhappy at what I discover (or think I discover). I really wanted the poem "Confessional" [*The Sacrifice*] to end after about four pages. And the work was telling me that it wasn't finished—it hadn't gone on a long enough journey, there had to be a further journey. The work does tell you things: the words are telling you things. As you live with them and reread them with the coldest eye you can muster, finally you do see their inadequacy.

I'm not encouraging people to adopt vehement positions that they have not felt, or discovered. On the other hand I would be lying if I said, "After Christianity, guilt really doesn't have any meaning." It's not true, in my life! I'm not a Christian any longer, and I still feel guilt. Now that's a kind of *fact* to me. It's something I don't know how to deny. And then I have to try—because it seems so important in my life—I have to try to discover how that can be. The book *The Sacrifice* went as far as I could go exploring its topography. When I began the book, the rational humanist liberal academic position seemed to be that, because guilt is the result of outmoded injunctions in which we no longer believe—the result of the Church telling children that they shouldn't masturbate, or something—once the beliefs are given up,

guilt disappears. It's not true. The fact is, people feel... They make promises to one another, then they feel imperatives to remember them. And if one cannot fulfill those promises—promises that matter, whose abrogation causes pain—one feels guilt. You feel guilt *even when you think you are doing or did the right thing*. Our life is essentially a condition in which contradictory demands are placed upon us by not only others but ourselves. There's no way out of that. There are good reasons why we make commitments, and good reasons why we at times do not live up to the same commitments. There are obviously bad and stupid ways that people put double binds on one another. But life is *full* of double binds—situations where we must do this, and we must also at the same time do not-this. "Guilt" seems too weak a word for what we feel...

I think one thing that happens in tragedy is the acceptance of the implications of one's actions, even though at a certain level one did not choose them. Oedipus is not wrong to blind himself: he's saying in effect, "Okay, I didn't know I was sleeping with my mother, I didn't know the person I was killing was my father. Nonetheless, it is a terrible wrong to sleep with one's mother and to kill one's father—not because the gods say so, but because it is. And I must *in my body* bear the mark that I not only know it's wrong, but have chosen to be marked by that." And that, in a way, is an act of freedom. I don't want to idealize his act. But it is *an* act that represents choice in relation to a universe where all his earlier choices were illusory choices, had been (in fact) predicted. Now, such an act does not "solve" the issue of guilt. The point is that you experience in your life issues that the culture pretends are solved but that you know in your gut are not solved. They are not solved by whatever fashions are reigning in the academy. When I began to think about this and brood about it, I went to a bookstore with a good philosophy section and kept looking up the word "guilt." It was almost nonexistent in the indexes. It's as if people were saying, "If you pretend it's not there, it will go away."

DA: So you think that, when one is fascinated by a question and needs to answer it for one's self—even in a context where it is an unstated question—one simply finds the language for it?

FB: You must trust that. You must be skeptical about what you have made, but finally trust the coldest eye that you can in time summon in yourself. That I passionately think. It's what you have. And ultimately, I think you have to just not pay attention to the kind of poem dominating the magazines. Because it will change. In ten years the fashion will be different—I have seen several revolutions in whatever fashion dominates. If you take any one of them too seriously, you're stopped, or you're going to start imitating it and be stuck there.

AR: What do you think young poets need to know? What is your view regarding the poet's education? (You might compare this to your own experience.)

FB: You need to know the past. You need to know English literature and—as much as possible—world literature, world poetry. You simply *have* to know Milton, and Herbert, and Shakespeare, and Donne, and Chaucer, and Pope—not to reinvent the wheel, not to do much less well than they did the thing that they are doing. And you need to know Cavafy, and you need to know Lorca, and you need to know Achebe... Not that I know all the things that you need to know!

AR: Do you encourage your students to find out about things which don't seem “poetic”—knowledge, in other words, that is not necessarily literary?

FB: Absolutely. Robert Pinsky has written wonderfully about that. The great moment is when something becomes accessible to you as an artist that really matters to you, when you realize that you can make poems out of what before seemed not-poetry. A chunk of the life of the mind suddenly becomes the stuff of art, available for examination. Think of the bravado and panache released when Ashbery figured out a way to make a poem that could begin: “The rise of capitalism parallels the advance of romanticism / And the individual is dominant until the end of the nineteenth century” [“Definition of Blue”].

But to return, for a moment, to Danielle's earlier point about Vietnam, about how the need for irony seems to arise partly from

disaffection with earlier forms of belief, false commitments that could cost you your life. I didn't respond to it very well. At a certain point, something about one's world view—even about one's instincts—is created by knowing about what an older generation went through. I think that's true of me in relation to World War II. At the same time, I don't think one simply thinks, "Ah, people did this in the war, and therefore I must not do this." The ways you understand the war—how people lived the war—have to do with the patterns and structures you place upon it. To resist the war (as I said earlier) you had to have as much passion as the people who were for it; perhaps more. So, it's not as if inevitably the proper response to Vietnam is skepticism about passion. What we learn from something like Vietnam, or the Depression, reflects something earlier and more primitive. You learn, first of all, the lives of the people you know—the older people you knew when you were growing up, what you saw on the street, or one's family. The lives one's parents lead, I think, are the deepest thing that they leave you. They may also leave you some money, or not, or debts. But what they really leave you is their lives, and they're often quite terrifying. So how one knows the world has a lot to do with how one has read one's parents' lives; through them you learn what issues are the real issues, the grinding issues.

DA: With your students at Wellesley, do you find that they are fascinated by grinding issues that are surprising to you?

FB: Well, these things change. Certainly a *leitmotif* is getting pregnant. Some women who do not then have the child, do not want to have the child, feel, to put it mildly, "ambivalence." I am entirely pro-abortion as a political option. But living through it is still hell, and it's a source of—in fact—guilt with a lot of women. It's a grinding experience. Another is being gay. Boyfriends!—relationships between the sexes are no simpler now than they ever were. And there's nothing banal about that; there doesn't have to be. Parents. There are a lot of foreign students at Wellesley; often they write about the contradiction between the culture they come from and this culture. Some feel nostalgia for the other country, "the old country"; others, that they have no real relation to, are bewildered or alienated by what they are

supposed to come from, to be representatives of. Or a parent is an immigrant who feels lost in this country, but clings to it. Each time any of this is lived through it's another journey, and they often write wonderful poems about it. They live it out in the most unpredictable, graphic ways.

AR: Guilt was the subject of *The Sacrifice*, and you have written about other large emotional and philosophical issues. "In the Western Night" is in some sense a love poem, and you've got Eros in *Desire*. Why is desire the motif in this book?

FB: There was a great deal—*everything*—about Eros that I had not yet explored. The great issues are inexhaustible. I felt that I hadn't even begun to pursue the territory. (Can you pursue a territory?) I wanted this poem to exist in relation to "The First Hour of the Night" [*In the Western Night*]; "First Hour" is so much about the incompatibilities within the conceptual patterns that people develop, about the collapse of Western metaphysics. A dream of order that is a dream of understanding. Out of this, in the poem's final dream, another kind of order and understanding appear, close to phenomenology (the dream about the horse in the landscape). Desire is not separate from any of this, but it is not Eros. I thought Eros had to be the next territory.

Now, after the new poems I've written since "Second Hour," it's obvious that *making* is the *next* territory. But the great issues are not separate from each other. There should be a side-chapel in each structure for each crucial issue—all the other central issues. The way we have an erotic life is not wholly separate from how we make things, or how we conceptualize a metaphysics. In the poems, I don't want there to be a wall between these subjects. They should move off into each other.

AR: Yesterday you talked about the statement, "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed." That appears in your poem "Borges and I," but it also appears in "The Second Hour of the Night."

FB: In “Second Hour,” it has to do with relations between generations. It’s a cruel principle, because the way Adonis lives out—well, he doesn’t *replicate* the life of his mother, but he lives out unresolved issues within it. From her speech, even within the womb he absorbed the story of Myrrha and Cinyras; now he must avenge his mother’s life by punishing Venus. This is not a conscious decision on his part: “children who have watched their parents’ / blighted lives blighted in the service of Venus / / must punish love itself.” That’s not what *she* was doing; inevitably, in filling out the pre-existing form created by the mother, he changes it. So in “Second Hour,” the sentence from “Borges and I” exists in psychic/erotic generational terms—family terms. Unlike in “Borges and I,” it’s a tragic principle.

DA: I want to ask you about the “making,” and how you discovered your interest in this as a whole new territory. Did you discover your interest in it by realizing that you were starting to write lots of poems about it, or by thinking about Eros, finding the idea of making all of a sudden very pressing?

FB: All of these things are in us. At some point the lens falls upon them and they enlarge. The idea of making is central to “Borges and I”; in the early part of *Desire*, it’s not the dominant subject, but it’s there. Later in the book, in “Second Hour” (as you’ve said), the “pre-existing forms” sentence gets connected to Eros, it becomes an aspect of how Eros plays itself out in the world. But the climax of the Myrrha story itself is about making—the gods transform her and her story into a new element in the world, appropriate to both the rituals of love and the rituals of death, capable of being everywhere, whose single existence is nowhere. She becomes, in effect, a work of art.

AR: There are many complicated and I think brilliant parallels in that poem.

FB: At some point you know in your bones the thing that you have talked about you haven’t done enough with, you haven’t gotten to the bottom of.



DA: Is “unmaking” going to follow along as the dark shadow of “making”?

FB: It probably has to, because everything has what Yeats calls its “counter-truth.”

DA: I always wonder if the shadow part is a scary part—whether if one fixes on an idea, the way its opposites suddenly appear too ends up being unsettling.

FB: It’s inescapable. You don’t have to *will* yourself into imagining the negative. Part of the problem with the word *making* is that it can seem much too simple an idea, without a dark side. Look, I like the poems about “making” I have thus far (I have about eleven poems). I do not know if I can write another “Hour” that will deepen them. I would like to. I have ideas, intimations. It’s by no means all there in my mind.

AR: You also find documents of which you can make artistic use.

FB: A lot of that is fortuitous. I knew I wanted to write about Eros for a long time. Nothing was quite crystallizing. Then James Lasdun and Michael Hofmann—the editors of the Farrar, Straus *After Ovid*—asked a lot of poets if they would write a poem based on something in Ovid. Lasdun called me up. I said that nothing immediately occurred to me. I had read a lot of *Metamorphoses*, but not all of it. I asked him to make a suggestion. He told me to look at, among other passages, Myrrha. He said of Myrrha (these words I will never forget): “I think it’s perhaps your kind of material.” A gift from the gods. It turned out the passage had already been assigned to Frederick Seidel; in any case, I couldn’t have done the poem within their time-frame, because when I read the Ovid I immediately knew that whatever I did with it would have to be very long.

Lasdun’s brilliant suggestion came at the right moment. It was *utterly* fortuitous. I don’t know what “Second Hour” would be if I hadn’t found the Myrrha story. I had carried around the Berlioz passage in

my head for years, as well as the “taste” litany from the *Manichean Psalm-Book*. After “First Hour,” as I’ve said, I felt the next subject had to be Eros. But if I hadn’t read the Myrrha story at that time, would I have been able to make a poem? (Perhaps I *had* read Myrrha much earlier, but it made no impression.) I felt (feel) *very* lucky; I learned so much about writing, writing that poem.

AR: I read the Myrrha story as an imaginative investigation of a universal truth about Eros. The fact that Myrrha and Cinyras have a punishing and transgressive relationship isn’t essential. Rather, the incest helps to disclose an unsettling truth about romantic love in general, or desire in general. But, on the other hand, is there anything about the transgressive quality of their relationship which resists generalization? There are kinds of desire—for example, desire between gay people—that are more obviously transgressive than others.

FB: The fact that it is transgressive illuminates the way that it is not chosen by Myrrha. She perceives it as not chosen. “*What she wants she does not want.*” I think all love, if it is powerful, is not chosen. We do not choose the people that turn us on. And I don’t mean turn us on for an hour sexually. I mean deeply engage us. If you’re lucky, the object of that will be someone about whom society says, “Oh, it’s great that you love that person.” But it’s very often not the case. We’re returning to the issue of how you come to see something. The king, seemingly full of power and whose infidelities appear to pose no threat to him, doesn’t see a damn thing. Myrrha, whose own psyche terrifies her, sees a lot about how things are. But she doesn’t see everything. She doesn’t know that the reason she is going down the corridor toward her father’s bed is because her nurse wants revenge against her father. In a magical way, the door that did not exist suddenly stands open. She doesn’t understand why. It’s terrible that it stands open. In some sense, she’s a puppet of the nurse at that moment, just as in some sense she’s a puppet of her own desire. As the poem says, she is “not free not to choose.” She can perhaps choose not to, or she can perhaps choose to—but she’s not free *not* to choose.

I think, at some level, everything in the poem proceeds from the

character of the father. The father is profoundly seductive without ever acknowledging *his* desire—I think people often are. The nurse’s fury at the father proceeds from his nature and character: the showy promise to help the Greeks that he cannot in fact fulfill, trickily followed by the showy sleight-of-hand that killed the nurse’s father and brother. All this is connected to the way in which he does not know himself. He adores being the sexy paradigm of all that is desirable in his daughter’s eyes; faced with the fact of the erotic relationship between them, all he can think to do is to try to kill her. I’m not saying, “Oh, the *reason* she feels this erotic attraction is the character of the father.” It’s not quite that simple. But “this thing lodged within her” is partly generated by the nature of the father—he’s not just, in other words, *any* father. The gods didn’t just say, “Now *she* is going to feel this.” There is a logic, a dynamic here, but complicated and partly unknowable. Obviously, because I’m gay, what I’ve experienced bears on what I see.

AR: The outsider—

FB: The outsider, exactly. Nonetheless I feel they’re not insights relevant only to being gay, or being an outsider.

DA: There is a little thing in this that I’m wondering about. “She wants what she does not want, she chooses what she does not choose,” reminds me of “The Yoke” [*Desire*]. You talk about wanting to find embodiment through language. The great thing about “What she wants she does not want” is that one’s mind turns into this box of constrictions.

FB: “*The yoke / that is not a yoke*” is characteristic of the language of mysticism. It’s a relief, a release to read the mystics—not because I’m a Christian, or believer in any god. The mystics found a way of talking about a kind of complexity that ordinary language does not acknowledge. If common-sense is built on “This means *this* and does not mean not-*this*,” the language of the mystics embraces contradiction, assertion-by-denial and denial-by-assertion.

AR: One conclusion I draw from “The Second Hour of the Night” is that desire is indifferent to the social order, and indifferent to the well-being of the people who experience it. It is this frightening and potentially destructive thing. This is clearly not the conventional, sentimental view of love, and in that sense the poem feels like a challenge to what people think that they see when they look at the objects of their desires. But saying that love is not chosen—*that* does seem to be the conventional view. “Love at first sight,” etc.

FB: People love that about love. But they don’t consider its implications; one thing that makes the view sentimental is that it’s not pursued. Common wisdom, cliché, is grounded in *something*, but doesn’t pursue it far enough.

Our culture is incredibly sentimental about love. Novels and newspapers are full of people who do terrible things out of love, not just good things. Love and hate are *very* connected, *very* intimate: Catullus saw this with breathtaking explicitness and concision early in the tradition, which is why I’ve been so obsessed with trying to translate “Odi et Amo” (which is untranslatable). In the movies, when the young couple finally get into bed together—the music swells, and we’re supposed to feel, “Oh isn’t this wonderful,” and I’m often thinking, “Oh god, you don’t know what you’re doing, be careful!”

AR: Which is Berlioz’s thought in “The Second Hour of the Night.”

FB: Exactly. That’s how the Berlioz is connected to the rest.

There’s a great story by Delmore Schwartz called “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.” I don’t know how much it’s read now; it’s important to every member of my own generation I’ve ever discussed it with. The story is a dream narrative; the narrator is in a movie theater, watching a film in which he can see the actual courtship of his parents. His father proposes. His mother accepts. He suddenly stands up at his seat and yells at the screen, “Don’t do it! Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous.” Sometimes I feel a version of that. Love is so much more complicated, and dire, than our culture in general acknowledges!

DA: I'm not sure I'm convinced by that, that we don't acknowledge it. I feel as if everyone is obsessed with rising divorce rates and things like that. I'm not saying we don't have a facile way of talking about it—very facile. But I often feel as if the movies are about precisely trying to avoid thinking about what you know has to be thought about—in a self-conscious way, not in a simple, naive way.

FB: I don't care about the divorce rate. Well, maybe it does represent *something*....

DA: That was just sort of a tag for people's obsession with the negative.

FB: I feel I've seen a lot of relationships, I've seen a lot of marriages. They aren't always catastrophic, but they often are. When a marriage breaks up, the pain is often *unbelievable*. And, in a divorce, the terrible things that people often do to each other are frightening. I do think it is *so* much more charged...yet it will turn out to be one of the axes on which one's life is lived.

As a kid, I felt that I was the center of my mother's emotional life. At a certain point, as a late teenager, I got restive with that, but basically I liked it, you know? I liked the fact that I had supplanted my father in my mother's affections, and then supplanted my step-father. It was a very close relationship that finally I felt almost killed me, threatened to strangle me. But I also wanted it. All I'm saying is that love is a *very* complicated thing. There's no way of knowing what you are doing when you enter it, or get committed to it... At the end of "Second Hour," there is a line: "I tasted a sweet taste, I found nothing sweeter." You can't live—I don't want anybody to have to live—without that sweetness. Ecstasy is involved.

It was an illumination for me to meet Joe Brainard. Joe was somebody who did not fit into the categories. We were never lovers, but it was more than a friendship. There was a sweetness of spirit in him that was very extraordinary, and I *definitely* was in love with him, and I in no way regret that. Though, of course, there is pain in it because he died. But there would have been pain, different pain, not meeting him. I'm not saying that people shouldn't fall in love or get married—

that one shouldn't give one's heart. I'm saying I don't think one should do so thinking one is escaping enormous implications and even tragedy. But it's utterly bound up with one's imagination of goodness and sweetness and ecstasy. I don't want to sound as if I'm Thersites...

DA: You sound like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, how's that?

FB: Well, good!

DA: I'm curious to know who your favorite philosophers are?

FB: They vary depending on who and when I'm reading. Certainly Schopenhauer. Plato. Hegel. Nietzsche. Freud, and also Jung. Philosophers who are wonderful writers. Every system finally seems circumscribed—but the thinkers who write well have a constantly surprising human complexity to their sentences. You read them as poets, great poets.

DA: What about Plotinus? Isn't he important for his emphasis on emblems?

FB: At least in MacKenna's translation, no one is subtler about the soul in the ecstasy of vision. I'm happy to end in the resonances of the word "emblem." The act of making can't armor itself against promising, against conferring or failing to confer meaning and significance. (I'm glad we're at an end. I'm tired of the things I think I think.)