

THE WOLF INTERVIEW: CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

Clayton Eshleman is a major American poet and translator who has been at the heart of international poetry since the early 1960s. He has published over forty books including *The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo* (University of California Press, 2007) and a 630-page reader, *The Grindstone of Rapport*, which collects from forty years of Eshleman's poetry, prose, and translations (Black Widow Press, 2008). Since 2010 he has been astonishingly prolific: *Anticline*, Black Widow, 2010, *Curdled Skulls* (translations of Bernard Bador, Black Widow, 2011), *Solar Throat Slashed* (translations of Aimé Césaire, with A. James Arnold, Wesleyan, 2011), *Endure* (translations of Bei Dao, with Lucas Klein, Black Widow, 2011) and *An Anatomy of the Night* (BlazeVOX, 2012). Eshleman has won a US National Book Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, numerous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and two Landon Translation Prizes from the Academy of American Poets. In 1994, he was a Fellow at the Rockefeller Study Center in Bellagio, Italy, where he wrote a 50-page poem on Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Eshleman was also the founder and editor of two of the most important literary journals in the latter half of the twentieth century: *Caterpillar* (1967-1973, 20 issues) and *Sulfur* (1981-2000, 46 issues). His forthcoming collections include *The Price of Experience*, Black Widow, 2012 and *Sakra Boccata* (translations of Jose Antonio Mazzotti, Ugly Duckling, 2013).

I think of you as a writer who has taken to heart the Blakean injunction to ‘create my own system or be enslaved by another man’s’. How conscious, how important is this? Even your translations are a part of your own personal mythology, a development of self and its ‘own system’ as if by soul-borrowing, soul-lending. The two recent books, *Reciprocal Distillations* (Hot Whiskey Press, 2007) and *An Anatomy of the Night* (BlazeVOX Books, 2011) display a Yeatsian revisitiation of themes, autobiographical lyric, channelling of poet-guides such as Vallejo, Ice Age cave musings, Americana etc. all bricks to your ‘own system’. A phrase from the anti-American protest poem ‘Consternation 1’ seems to give a name to this: I quote the poem’s conclusion:

Americana Logic 101

“Let us live so well that we can give our government permission to intervene, brutalize, & reap.”

How deep is the Chosen People lode?

Do I write (as tough as it is to write coherently),

because it is less demanding than to press through political walls?

For what have I built this *House of Eshleman*?

**For it to be shuffled & dealt out to those
who’ll turn it over as *Ash Lemon Mouse*?**

Your system, your opus, is the ‘*House of Eshleman*’. Yet elsewhere the ‘*House of Eshleman*’ is also seen in a negative way as the baggage of childhood, origins, family, past, perhaps something to be knocked down.

In mentioning Blake’s ‘system’ you must be referring to the symbolic *personae* of the four ‘zoas’ and their corresponding identity with the wheels of Ezekiel and with the four beasts of the Apocalypse. As Blake readers know, Urizen, Tharmas, Luvah and Urthona are Blake’s split-off archetypal formations and they perform mental war against each other in a way that to some extent creates a new mythology, jettisoning the old mythical universe. I say ‘to some extent’ since the activities of Blakean ‘zoas’ are also bound by the Biblical clasps: Creation and Apocalypse.

While living in Kyoto in the early 1960s I studied Blake daily and without knowing much about what I was doing began what intended to be an epic called ‘The Tsuruginomiya Regeneration’ named after the Shinto shrine across the street from the nineteenth-century Japanese house in which my first wife Barbara and I lived. What I was attempting was something not very systematic at all, but a conceiving and release in imagination of my own symbolic figures: Yorunomado, Niemonjima, the Sons of the Sepik Delta, Origin, Mokpo, and Coatlicue. I attempted to turn such words into symbolic currents that might display my own self-initiation into poetry. Looked at from a Blakean point of view (as Harold Bloom did in a long dismissive letter to me) my attempts were pretty crude but had nothing to do with a closed system such as one finds in Blake.

‘The Tsuruginomiya Regeneration’ has never been published as such, but parts of it, along with some other poems, were collected in *Coils* (1973). As part of the Introduction to the first section, I wrote: ‘I had begun to realize that in working on Vallejo (I was attempting to translate his *Poemas humanos* during my Kyoto years) I had ceased merely to be what I was before coming to Japan; I had a glimpse now of another life, a life that I was to create rather than be given. This other man I was struggling with was the old Clayton who was resisting change. The old Clayton wanted to continue living in his white Indiana Protestant world of “light”—not really light, but the “light” of man associated with day/clarity/good and woman associated with night/opaqueness/bad. The darkness that was beginning to make itself felt in my sensibility could be viewed as the breaking up of that “light”. In giving birth to myself, or more accurately to my Self, Blake’s poetry became very important. I wanted to converse with Blake and knew I could not do this in the sense of Clayton talking with William, but that I might be able to do it if I created a figure of my imagination. It was really not Blake himself I wanted to converse with, but Blake’s imagination which he created and named Los. The Japanese also see the stomach as the centre of a person (in contrast to Western brain and heart). For this reason they have seen disembowelment (“seppuku”) as the most noble way to die. I saw my initial work on my Self as disembowelment, a cutting into myself, leading to the birth of Yorunomado whom I envisioned chained to an altar in my solar plexus until the moment of his birth.’

Vallejo (not only as a poet but as a figure of my imagination) and Yorunomado (my headhunter *doppelganger* whose name comes from that of the coffee shop—the word in

Japanese means ‘night window’—in which I worked on my Vallejo translation in 1963) have persisted as figures in my poems unto this day but, as earlier, they are not counters in a symbolic system.

The closest that I have gotten to anything that even smacks of a systematic alignment is my perception while studying the paintings and engravings in the Ice Age caves of southwestern France in the mid to late 1970s that the back wall of imagination can be found in the caves’ hybrid figures (human bodies with bird and animal heads), and that they represent the first ‘mental travel’ (bringing Blake’s ‘The Mental Traveller’ to mind) and thus, via what I’d call a kind of proto-shamanism, the origins of poetry. My growing awareness of the caves (which I studied from 1974 to 1999) led to a recognition that, as an artist, I belong to a pre-tradition that includes the earliest nights and days of soul-making. Over the past thirty-eight years I have let Cro-Magnon images (and my fantasies based on them) tumble kaleidoscopically into poems that are with few exceptions grounded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The passage that you quote offers ‘Ash Lemon Mouse’ as a cartoonic distortion of my name, Eshleman’, hearing ‘Ash’ in ‘Esh’, ‘Lemon’ in ‘le’, and ‘Mouse’ as a parody of ‘Man’. I am, as I am sure some of my contemporaries are, caught up on the twin horns of the following dilemma: we believe that writing poetry is the most meaningful thing we could be doing with our lives while at the same time we see it occupying only an infinitesimal part of social space. Plus, and here I must speak for myself only: in the social space left to us, nearly all of the poetry reviewed, lauded, and prized today, is not the real thing.

You are, like two of the poets you most admire—Antonin Artaud and Peter Redgrove—an exponent of the shamanistic approach to poetry. I gather you believe that such an approach is inexorable for poets who are ‘going through an experience’. I also gather that you doubt whether a Western writer can attain to the shaman’s level or status, but that in falling short of it the poet might go further than those who reject such a venture. Redgrove once answered a question of mine with a succinct ‘Poetry *is* shamanism.’ (After which I seemed to hear an echo, or maybe Redgrove ventriloquising himself: ‘*is* poetry’.) You have been described as ‘a shaman without a single superstition’ and also as an exponent of ‘ethnopoetics’, alongside such figures as Jerome Rothenberg. Is ‘ethnopoetics’ an adequate term for you? In a poem like ‘Placenta’ you seem to reincarnate as a Gershon Winklerian ‘Judeo-Apache’. Does this approach alienate you from fellow poets, or them from you? Some speak dismissively of ‘the shamanic analogy’. Is ‘white shamanism’ possible, or more an ‘ism’ than an ‘is’? It seems to be something to do with a total immersion in one’s own imagination, a non-stop involvement. And with having visions, or having had a vision?

In the Introduction to my Artaud translation, *Watchfiends & Rack Screams: Works from the Final Period*, I addressed Artaud’s connection to shamanism. Unlike some poets who attempt to imitate what they take to be shamanic presence in their writing, Artaud (who to my knowledge never consciously made use of shamanic lore or stance), throughout his

life, had experiences that define various stages of a shaman's life. These include complaints throughout the 1920s of being nonexistent, a vision quest to the Mexican Tarahumaras (several decades before Carlos Castaneda popularized such journeys), use of a magic dagger and cane, the loss of self-identity, and being possessed by doubles and demons. To all of this we must add Artaud's subjection to a particularly pernicious kind of twentieth-century lightning, electroshock, during one seizure of which he was thought to have died. 'Dismembered' in a Bardo coma by battalions of hungry ghosts, he returned, semi-invented, with a new language composed of incantation and brilliant, if paranoid, argument. He bore, out of his heart, a new progeny of warrior-daughters who became his assaulted messengers and saviours. He used the block of wood that Dr. Delmas placed in his room in Ivry like a drum. He also had a 'bridge' which he wrote was located between his anus and his sex, and it was upon that bridge that he was murdered by God who pounced on him in order to sack his poetry. His envisioned organless body was an unsolvable problem because the lightning that destroyed 'the old Artaud' (burying him in his own toothless gum) did not provide new quartz organs, or chunks of solidified light.

What is devastatingly missing in this shaman scenario is a community. On this level, Artaud is a Kafka man, put through a profound and transfiguring ritual while finding out, stage by stage, that it no longer counts. The Theatre of Cruelty he pours himself into is ultimately truly cruel because the ceremonies themselves—what I could call the imaginative design of Artaud's madness—mean nothing to anyone but Artaud. Artaud is a shaman in a nightmare in which all the supporting input from a community that appreciates the shaman's death and transformation as an aspect of its own wholeness is, instead, handed over to mockers who revile the novice at each stage of his initiation. I do not know of another twentieth-century poet anywhere whose life reveals those regal and leprous lineaments of shamanic transformation that, as I proposed in my response to the first question, are at the heart of poetry. Peter Redgrove, whose poetry I admire immensely, may claim, as you quote, that 'poetry *is* shamanism', but such a definition is actively irrelevant to the lives and works of all the poets I know about, with the exception of Artaud. Scattered tribes in such places as north-central Canada, Greenland, and certain regions of Siberia, definitely as late as the nineteenth century, had figures whose quests, initiations and practices could truly be called shamanistic.

Concerning ethnopoetics: this is Jerome Rothenberg's formulation which I am very sympathetic with, but not directly a part of. I suppose you could extend my work on the deep past and connect it with ethnopoetics but such is an association, not a link. Back in 1966, I was suspicious of what Jerry was up to when he was asking American poets to transform ethnographic or missionary versions of tribal poetries into a kind of Williamsesque speech-oriented American poetry. I recall sitting in the living room of Paul Blackburn's flat on East 7th Street in NYC, which I had rented for the summer of 1966, staring at a missionary version of an African hippopotamus chant and feeling absurd. The chant, in the version given me, was not only stilted and probably riddled with translation errors, but it was just one aspect of a charged, sensual rite involving dance, colour, smells, food, and the environment. So I told Jerry that I did not know how to do anything with it and did not become involved in his ethnopoetic project.

Since then I have decided that in spite of my objections to the ‘hippopotamus chant’ situation, that Rothenberg’s project was an honest and imaginative attempt at a grand inclusion of the world’s poetries relative to twentieth-century American poetry. In terms of the continental USA, as demonstrated in the Rothenberg and George Quasha anthology of the mid-1970s, *America A Prophecy*, the ethnopoetic push brought to bear on poetry written for the most part by white, heterosexual, citified males, indigenous and folk poetries heretofore excluded and confined to such categories as Folklore and Ethnography. I recall Helen Vendler’s fury in her attack on *America A Prophecy* in The New York Times. She could not tolerate such inclusiveness. Imagine! A chorus line with Gertrude Stein kicking next to Sitting Bull!

Following on from the previous question, you seem to have a ‘totem animal’ in the form of a spider. This is, presumably, because you experienced a serious vision, as recounted in the essay ‘Companion Spider’. You were looking for a sign, to further your poetry, your being a poet. I quote:

‘I felt commanded to look up: some forty feet above my head was the spider, completely bright red, the size of a human adult, flexing her legs as if attached to and testing her web. After maybe thirty seconds the image began to fade. I immediately felt that I had been given a totemic gift and that it would direct my relation to poetry. Out of my own body, I was to create a matrix strong enough in which to live and hunt.’

Another of your self-conceptualisations is that of ‘Spidermind’. Did you have an earlier encounter or obsession with spiders, or was this the first? Is the spider not a somewhat scary guide and/or self-image, for others and yourself? Other poets have stigmatised the spider as an image of centralised power, or matriarchy, or... You must be happy to have ended up with Black Widow Press.

Yes, in Kyoto, fall of 1962, there was a gorgeous red, yellow and green *Aranea* centred in her web attached to a persimmon tree branch in the backyard of Barbara’s and my first house there. I got used to taking a chair and a little table out there under the web where I’d read. After several weeks of ‘spider sitting’ the weather turned chill, with rain and gusting wind. One afternoon I found the web wrecked, the spider gone. Something went through me that I can only describe as the sensation of the loss of one beloved. I cried and for several days felt nauseous and absurd. When I tried to make sense out of my reaction, I recalled César Vallejo’s poem, ‘La Arana’, which I first read in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1958, right at the time that I had started to get serious about writing poetry. Like the loss of the Kyoto spider, the poem had gone right through me. I could not get it out of my mind for months:

The Spider

It is an enormous spider that now cannot move;
a colorless spider, whose body,

a head and an abdomen, bleeds.

Today I watched it up close. With what effort
toward every side
it extended its innumerable legs.
And I have thought about its invisible eyes,
the spider's fatal pilots.

It is a spider that tremored caught
on the edge of a rock;
abdomen on one side,
head on the other.

With so many legs the poor thing, and still unable
to free itself. And, on seeing it
confounded by its fix
today, I have felt such sorrow for that traveler.

It is an enormous spider, impeded by
its abdomen from following its head.
And I have thought about its eyes
and about its numerous legs...
And I have felt such sorrow for that traveler!

A week later, I decided to motor out to northwest Kyoto and visit Gary Snyder. Gary was not home, so I had tea with Joanne Kyger and, late in the afternoon, started the half-hour drive back home. Riding south on Junikendoori, it appeared that the motorcycle handlebars had become ox horns and that I was riding on an ox. A lumber company turned into a manger of baby Jesus and kneeling Wise Men. I forced myself to stay aware that I was in moving traffic. Looking for a place to turn off, I spotted Nijo Castle with its big tourist bus parking lot. Getting off my ox-cycle, I felt commanded to circumambulate the square Castle and its moat. It is then that I had the spider vision that you quote in your question.

Over the years I have noticed a lot of ramifications of having accepted the spider as my conformational figure (and thus imbuing it with muse-like qualities). I've reflected on the overlap between Arachne and Ariadne and the extent to which the web prefigures the labyrinth. In an ambitious poem called 'The Tjurunga', written in 2008, I wrote:

Theseus, a tiny spider, enters a tri-level construction:
look down into the poem, you can see the labyrinth.
Look down into the labyrinth, you can see the web.

Of all of our archetypal creative designs, one of the oldest must be that of the labyrinth. The natural spinning mind of the earth weaves itself in personifications throughout our humanity.

You ask if I have had an earlier encounter or obsession with spiders. I think that my earliest spider experience was seeing, when I was around eleven, the film 'Tarzan's Desert Mystery', which had Tarzan at one point battling a gigantic spider in a cave. Spider and cave. It is as if two major preoccupations in my life as a writer were initially sparked by that film.

Your intensity and seriousness can be disturbing, though these are more uncommon in British poetry than in American. We're used to American poets being disturbed and disturbing—e.g. Eliot, Lowell, Ginsberg, Plath—and to American poetry being a demon-wrestling art. To what extent is there a therapeutic dimension to your work, if any, and to what extent is it calculatedly shocking, if any? Do you feel less clubbable, publishable, anthologizable, or canonizable because of it? I'm thinking of a poem such as 'The Death of Bill Evans' which seemed so dark that you were wary of showing it to your wife, your closest reader. Your spiritual collaboration with Artaud must have something to do with it? Or perhaps it all feels perfectly normal to you?

In a 1985 essay that became the Introduction to my collection *The Name Encanyoned River: Selected Poems 1960-1985*, Eliot Weinberger wrote: 'It is precisely Eshleman's utter fearlessness that scares people off. No other American poet has laid so much of his life on the line.' While I was completing the writing of the poems in the 1973 *Coils*, my old friend Denis Kelly sent me a copy of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*. Bakhtin's elaboration of what he called 'grotesque realism' in that book supported many thoughts that I had had in the 1960s, thoughts that often felt too weird or frightening to put into poetry. And it was Bakhtin who gave me the courage to go all the way with my background in *Coils*, to, as we used to quip, let it all hang out. In that sense, the presence of Bakhtin and the writing in *Coils* greatly released me from self-repression. Weinberger again: 'Eshleman's critics tend to read him in terms of the Romantic grotesque, when his intent has been clearly the opposite. His grotesque is ecstatic and comic; through a systematic shedding of the oppressive weight of national identity and personal biography, he has taken the grotesque beyond Bakhtin's Medieval carnival back to its source: the grotto, the cave. And there he has sought, and partially found, what Bakhtin calls "the complete freedom that is possible only in the completely fearless world".'

In the late 1960s, in NYC, I completed Reichian therapy with Dr. Sidney Handelman in a year and a half. Such has been my sole adventure with a professional therapy. Writing poetry is certainly a psychic exercise. Basically it keeps one in touch with oneself and keeps Theseus active in his quests for intercourse with the Minotaur. Given American access to images of violence here and abroad, and the lack of censorship in written media (as well as on some TV channels), nothing that a poet might say should be shocking anymore. But of course this is not quite true. For most Americans, art is still poised on a nineteenth-century pedestal.

I held back showing 'The Death of Bill Evans' to Caryl because I was frightened that the poem knew more about me than I knew about myself at the time. I wanted to catch up to what the poem knew before I shared it with anyone. As you know from reading 'Interface II: Fracture' (in which the poem first appeared) the following evening I had a car accident in which I fractured my left ankle. Being in a leg cast for several months was a big nuisance (and an even bigger one for Caryl) but there was some psychic compensation in 'Visions of the Fathers of Lascaux' a middle-length poem I wrote while Caryl drove us about in Germany where the American Consulate in Bad Godesberg had set up a month of poetry readings.

One thing I know from reading your work is: anything can happen in a Clayton Eshleman poem. Or essay. They are full of obsessions: Bacon or Hart Crane or Bosch or Paul Blackburn. Yet there is also much self-consciousness and self-referencing. I'm thinking of poem [28] in *An Anatomy of the Night* which begins with a dream of turning up at universities for poetry readings to find you had no books or that they were in foreign languages. This causes you to wonder if your work is incomprehensible. What is your view of the debate between subjective and objective poetry, both of which you do? Rimbaud, for instance, called for 'objective poetry' while Hopkins warned against 'subjective rot'. I always like to remember that, originally, the whole point of lyric poetry was to voice the individual worldview, and that without subjectivity it might well be merely a dull form of drama or epic. Such is the current distaste for subjective dredgings, these days we even get 'documentary poems'.

Generous of you to say that anything can happen in one of my poems. To some extent I agree, for, as Henry Miller put it late in his life, 'The point I discovered is that the best technique is none at all. I never feel that I must adhere to any particular manner of approach. I try to remain open and flexible, ready to turn with the wind or with the current of thought.' I might use the word 'wine' where Miller uses 'wind'. However, all poets are at the mercy of what the subconscious offers. There is always a complicated dance going on in my composing between the irrational and the rational. I have cultivated what one might call 'a shit detector' that rules out, while I am writing, what I think is nonsense, common sense (versus uncommon sense), repetition, cliché, and dumb adage. But these are split second decisions and sometimes the rational mind (which decides to let something in versus keeping it out) is incapable of spotting the irrational mind's 'logic of metaphor' (Hart Crane's wonderful term).

Robert Kelly wrote a sound piece on subjective vs. objective. Here it is:

The Subjective

is not the opposite of the rigorous.

It is the most rigorous, the most difficult.

The precise subjective is what the philosophers are too

lazy & too generalizing to labor, scientists too

frightened to search out.

The Objective is p.r. for the Generalization.

Objective Order, so-called, is mental artifact,
Consensus, 'collective consciousness,'
'lethargy of custom (STC'

The 'objective' is a consolation prize for those
who've lost the real.

That said, one then has to deal with great objective-oriented poetry, such as Hugh MacDiarmid's 'description' of autumn in his James Joyce poem, or Charles Reznikoff's edited trial records in 'Holocaust'.

My waking mind does not believe that my poetry is incomprehensible (although I admit to having the repeated dream that you quote from). I can do a gloss on any poem I have published and demonstrate if not its coherence at least its intelligibility.

I want to ask you about surrealism, to what extent you are sourced in surrealism, and what do you think of the success or otherwise of surrealism in poetry? Do you admire David Gascoyne, or Dylan Thomas or Bob Dylan, all of whom seem to incorporate Surrealism successfully in their poetry? A line of yours from the poem 'Spirits of the Head' (Bacon Studies) seems like pure surrealism: 'Become a chocolate skull, wrapped in white silk, teeth sewn shut, sockets shell-stoppered.' Of course, it is also faithfully describing a Bacon head, he is not a Surrealist. Is Aragon's *A Wave of Dreams* of interest to you?

I do not know Gascoyne's work or Aragon's *A Wave of Dreams*. Relative to surrealism, Thomas is a complicated case. There is automatic writing in the early 1930 notebooks that Ralph Maud has edited, but the finished body of work that one finds in the *Collected Poems* is structured under a highly conscious formal control. Thomas was one of the first poets I read upon discovering poetry in 1957 but as in the case of e.e. cummings I lost interest in his work when I started reading more widely. Bob Dylan's lyrics have never engaged me, though I do recall Gary Snyder's interest in such Dylan lines as 'ladders of white water' from songs Allen Ginsberg, Gary and I listened to in Kyoto in 1963.

Of all the surrealist-associated poets Artaud and Aimé Césaire have impressed me the most. But it is not possible to identify Artaud's Rodez and post-Rodez writings as belonging to any movement other than that of his own crushed and fulgurating mind. There are smudges of the surreal in a poem like 'Artaud the Mômô' left over from his early affiliations with the group but the main thrust of the poem is that of a cratered psyche rising into view, smelling of its multiple deaths and proud of its contours, affirmationally ghastly in its power to at once protect and organize its loathed and beloved cores.

Césaire was able to inject into Breton generation surrealism a politically acute Martinican sensibility. A Césaire poem of the late 1940s is an intersection in which metaphoric trceries create historically aware nexuses of thought and experience, jagged solidarity and apocalyptic surgery.

Here it seems appropriate to point out that I was on my way on my own as a poet when I began to read and then translate Artaud and Césaire. When it comes to primary literary inspiration, I would cite Neruda's *Residence on Earth* I and II, Vallejo's *Human Poems*, nearly all of Blake (from *Songs of Experience* to *Jerusalem*), Charles Olson's poetry from the mid-to-late 1950s, and Hart Crane's *White Buildings*. But I think I have drawn inspiration from the paintings of Chaim Soutine, Aztec sculpture (Coatlícue!), and Bud Powell's piano playing as much as I have from the poets I have mentioned.

I was amused by your identification of the line you quoted in this question as being 'pure surrealism'. My line is a precise description of a decorated skull from nineteenth-century French Polynesia.

Césaire is one of the poets who you have extensively explored via translation. *Solar Throat Slashed* (Wesleyan Press, 2011) is yours and A. James Arnold's recent re-working of Césaire's original 1948 version of the book, on which he later edited down into a kind of reactionary revision. It's a highly exciting translation of an outstanding book which is up there with *Poet in New York* as a revolutionary single collection. Congratulations! You warn translators to avoid 'colonizing the foreign terrain of an original text' and 'especially in the case of a "first-world" translator working on a third-world writer'. You also say that a translator should emulate the 'performance value' of the original text. How do you negotiate the golden mean between these two brilliant nuances? You revised your own translation of a Vallejo line 'What a fucking story!' back to 'What a story!' by deleting the 'intensifier'. I notice a 'holy shit' in your Césaire, for 'holy name of God'; is that not a colonisation or at least a Western intensification? With Césaire, your justifiable qualms about the 'translator's ego' are perhaps added to by Césaire's own philosophical position of 'négritude'? How does a white translator of Césaire avoid coming up with a 'white négritude'?

My goal as a translator is to produce an accurate text that is up to the performance level of the original and that has a tonal personality so that it does not sound like something produced by a machine.

According to bilingual A. James Arnold, with whom I translated Césaire's *Soleil cou coupé* in 2009-2010, 'holy shit' is one of the ways that 'cré nom de Dieu' can be translated. It has much more spunk in it than 'holy name of God'.

I don't believe one's own race has much to do with one's ability to translate a poet of a different race. For whatever it is worth, the only black English language Césaire translator is T.J. Anderson III, who co-translated a handful of poems from *Soleil cou coupé* a decade ago after I pointed them out to him.

One feature of your work is poems about other poets. There should be a name for such poems-about-poets, something more specific than ‘a homage’. They are in a way love poems, because poets do have a huge love for their predecessors, who you call the ‘great dead’ (and also for peers). ‘At the Speed of Wine’, your long poem for Hart Crane, is an example. What is at stake in such poems, and are they somehow secondary to poems about ‘real life’?

Much of the inspiration for this ten page poem written in 1987 comes from my study and co-translation of a great poem by the Czech Vladimir Holan, ‘A Night with Hamlet’, in which the house-bound Holan imagines that he is visited by a Hamlet who over time has become a one-armed sexual maniac obsessed with virgins as well as a multilingual world traveller and a gracious and acculturated philosopher who in spite of his pessimism honours motherhood and childlike innocence. I decided that I would engage my sense of Crane in a bar, get into some free-wheeling talk with him there and then see what would happen. Such takes me back to an earlier remark of yours that in an Eshleman poem anything can happen. ‘At the Speed of Wine’ is a good example of generating a context which then proliferates on its own steam. I had no idea that my Crane was going to shove an iron stove into the bar and then hover over its glowing surface before leaping in to swim about in the flames. Once that happened, I jumped as well into what was now more a furnace than a stove so as to continue my conversation with him. This sort of associative proliferation is one of the great joys of poetry: following out on where the words themselves are taking me I end up in places I would have never visited other than in a dream.

Such poems are not in any way secondary to poems about, as you put it, ‘real life’. What is ‘real life’? Real life is what I imagine here; actual life is the lived life.

You mention two traditional ‘enemies’ of poetry: ‘education and entertainment’. This seems an unexpectedly funny slap in the face of Horace’s *Ars Poetica* in which poetry is supposed to educate and entertain. I suppose you’re referring to the reality of teaching poetry, which you write about very honestly in the essay ‘Remarks to a Poetry Workshop’. How do you cope with or fend off or make peace with the enemy of ‘education’? ‘Entertainment’ is presumably referring to light verse, or comic verse, or crowd-pleasing, though of course your own work can contain sudden flashes of humour; and there must always remain—from our Elizabethan heritage at least—something of ‘the wit’ about a poet.

We live in an era in which ‘creative writing’ has encroached upon the grounds traditionally occupied by ‘poetry’. In America at least (and I know that England now has master’s degrees in creative writing—several years ago my friend Peter Blegvad arranged for me to read to and then have dinner with such students at Warwick University) the majority of those calling themselves poets are either in or have been through a degree writing program. When I started writing poetry in the late 1950s there must have been no more than five hundred ‘serious’ poets in the country. Now there must be fifty thousand. Most of these writers learn about poetry via university workshops led by a professor poet

who conducts them as they say nice or mean things about each other's instrumentality. They try to teach each other even though much of the time they do not know what to say. They try to be polite because they want others to be polite to them. The creative writing the best of them produce is talented, superficially literary and utterly unoriginal.

When I wrote that education and entertainment are the two traditional enemies of poetry I slightly misspoke. I should have said 'contemporary enemies of poetry'. All of the twentieth-century American and world poets that I admire initiated themselves off themselves and while they may have written letters to their contemporaries they were primarily alone, as souls, in the universe, trying to focus on their reflection in turgid rivers. Try imagining César Vallejo emerging from an Iowa Creative Writing Workshop. Or Peter Redgrove. It can't be done.

I am not against teaching poetry in universities, but I do not think creative writing workshops should exist. Students should spend all of their classroom time reading mainly the great dead, with some of the possibly great living tossed in to keep a sense of poetry's contemporaneity in place. Students who write poetry themselves should be able, once a month, say, to schedule a couple of hours with a professor they choose to read what they are writing and to discuss their work with them. If they want to share their work with other students they should do this on their own, in someone's apartment or in a café. No degrees or grades should be given for such efforts.

I taught a fifty student Introduction to Poetry class each semester for the seventeen years that I was a professor in the English Department at Eastern Michigan University (1986-2003). I also taught, each semester, a beginning, advanced, or graduate creative writing workshop in poetry. Most students entered my courses having read no poetry at all before, or if they had, it had been in high school classes. Generally there was one Charles Bukowski fan each semester (who had read no one but Bukowski). To avoid getting writing that was so weak one could not critique it, I found that if I carefully, line by line, taught a short poem by Williams, Lawrence, or Snyder, say, and assigned the students an imitation of this poem, I got, in some cases, meaningful results. By studying Williams' 'Nantucket' and then doing an imitation of it, using their own room or an invented room, as the 'location', some students learned something about how a poem might be organized and in reading their classmates' efforts they had a model poem to compare them to. My best students were art majors, painters especially.

One obsession in your work is 'Caryl' your wife. There is a recurring vista of your wife sleeping as you observe and write about her. Is Caryl a muse? Do you have any Gravesian 'white goddess' tendencies? I mention in passing your account of Paul Blackburn's monolithic translation of the work of the Troubadours and how it affected the way he perceived women. Again, I see your 'Caryl' poems as an example of an American poet—like Plath—deepening and enriching the 'domestic poem'. I also think of John Lennon's line from 'God': 'Yoko and me... that's reality.' The realist in you cannot help but acknowledge the reality of 'Caryl' and seek to represent it? But that 'Caryl' is a fiction, a symbol? One also thinks of

Catherine Blake, she as William's 'emanation'. We also intuit that you work late into the night, as 'Caryl' sleeps. The poem 'For Caryl' is beautiful.

'For Caryl' is the dedication to *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld*.

My relationship, as a writer, with Caryl, is set forth in detail in a short essay, called 'Dedication', at the end of *The Name Encanyoned River: Selected Poems 1960-1985*.

Here is the gist of it: in the early 1970s I began to show Caryl worksheets and to discuss with her her responses to what she read. We have continued to do this for decades until recently when her poor health intervened. I would be responsible for initiating and completing a poem so there was no co-authorship. However, Caryl was often a major force in the middle passages, sometimes rewriting or suggesting a reconstruction of material that I knew had real worth but did not know how to successfully complete by myself. I am sure that I have become a more perceptive reader of my own work as well as a writer due to her contributions. At the end of 'Dedication' I wrote:

Thank you for these days, Caryl, and the late afternoons, and the evenings, thank you for providing a readership of the heart, a hearing that complexly sent forth its flotillas of response, the immediate response of one who is also the beloved. Had you not been here I would have lost, ruined, torn apart possible poems because as an only child the hardest thing I have had to learn to believe in has been not just the apparition of the other, but her friendship, the ways in which 'muse' can be present in the dialogue of two people. Who said inspiration takes place alone?

I also have written poems to Caryl, and have included her from time to time in poems. In 2000 she had a frozen left shoulder which required arthroscopic surgery. After the surgery took place, the doctor handed me a CD on which a film of the surgery could be viewed. It was quite amazing, for the camera had access to the interior of her shoulder so that all the cutting, flushing, and scraping could be viewed. With our friend, the physical therapist Mark Mijnsbergen (who had treated and reduced the pain from her frozen shoulder), I viewed the CD a half-dozen times, each time asking Mark what was going on, and what the instruments and procedures were called. Armed with such terms as 'debrider's rotary blade', 'trocar', 'humerus head', and 'octagonal lens' I wrote a three-page poem on the operation called 'Inside Caryl's Left Shoulder.'

As for who my 'muse' is: complicated question! I think of Caryl, in this regard, as part of a complex of inspirational goads, of which Garcia Lorca's 'duende', which I translate as 'bloodmare' is one as well as the spider. In a 1998 poem called 'Matrix, Blower', much too long to quote here, I took a shot at another aspect of this so-called complex:

I keep having this fuzzy vision of
a brain termite queen pumping out image tendrils,
and then a creature blowing into it
(Sirens, the night-side of the ancient form of the Muse,

are said to suck the breath of the sick
and are associated with siesta-nightmares)
'muse' akin to *musus*, 'animal muzzle,'
a Muse-muzzled succubus crawling across the dreamer
or up through the dreaming,
blowing the dreamer's mind,
mind ejaculating into Muse muzzle,
'psyche' akin to 'psychein' = to blow.

One of your many takings from Blake is the notion of 'mental travel' from his poem 'The Mental Traveller'. Unlike Blake, you have been a great physical traveller and have lived in many exotic, far-flung countries. Yet your work is far more 'mental travel' than travel poetry. Has physical travel aided the mental traveller? How aware is your work of the Anglo-French modern tradition of 'psychogeography'? Mental travel was in literature even before the *Odyssey*, I suppose, and is surely the subject of Shakespeare's Sonnet 44; and the Celts called a poem about a visionary journey an 'Immram'. Do you travel a lot as a poet in America?

In 1959, while we were graduate students at Indiana University, Bill Paden, a painter friend, gave me a copy of the 1947 New Directions *Latin American Poetry*. I was immediately attracted to Neruda and Vallejo. Since the anthology was bilingual, I began checking word choices in their selections, using an English-Spanish dictionary. I had the experience that I suppose many translators have at the beginning of their careers: one of shock at the astonishing discrepancies and outright errors (which even I could spot!) in these different versions. To some extent I became a translator reactively, disgruntled with what others had done, and with some unbased confidence that I could do a better job! My problem was that I did not know Spanish, nor anything about constructing a translation.

My first attempt to do something about these problems, and inspired by Neruda, was to hitchhike to Mexico City, the summer of 1959. Via the Beats, hitchhiking on long journeys of self-discovery (or ruin!) was very much in the air. Ginsberg had spent time in the state of Chiapas (southern Mexico) in 1954, and wrote one of his first impressive poems there: 'Siesta in Xbalba' (the Mayan word for the underworld). By 1959 there were Beat types in Mexico City writing poetry and giving readings in a couple of cafes. While attending a poetry reading I met Al Perez and Walter Compton, two American students who spoke Spanish. Together we translated several of the *Residencias* which I published in the English Department magazine, *Folio*, that fall.

The next summer I got a ride in the back of a flat-bed truck to Etzatlan, Mexico, ending up in Chapala for a couple of months. I rented a room in the home of an ex-American retired butcher named Jimmy George, who had a sixteen year-old Indian wife and lots of pigs and turkeys. I showed some Neruda poems to her one day and with her very modest English and my baby Spanish (and the faithful bilingual dictionary), we made some crude versions together, which were the real start of my *Residence on Earth* collection, published in Kyoto, Japan in 1962.

I had gone to Japan in the fall of 1961, as an Instructor for the University of Maryland's Overseas Division which supplied American instructors for college courses on military bases around the world. While living in Tokyo, Barbara and I hosted Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger who were passing through Japan on their way to join Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky in India. They informed me that I could make a living teaching English as a foreign language in Kyoto, where they lived, so in the summer of 1962 I left Maryland and we moved into several rooms in an old Japanese house in the Kyoto foothills. In Kyoto I finished my Neruda translation and started working on Vallejo's *Poemas humanos*, eighty-nine poems that were much denser and complex than Neruda's work. I decided that I would apprentice myself to poetry via completing a translation of the *Human Poems*. I ended up spending forty-two years, off and on, translating all of Vallejo's poetry. *The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo* was published by University of California Press in 2007.

Vallejo died in Paris in 1938, leaving the *Poemas humanos* in a hand-corrected unfinished typescript. Back in Bloomington, Indiana, after our return from Japan in the fall of 1964, I realized that to do a proper translation of this collection I had to inspect the original worksheets then in the possession of the poet's French widow, Georgette Vallejo, living in Lima, Peru. In August of 1965, with Barbara several months pregnant and a few hundred dollars, we left for Peru. Our nine months there was fraught with blocks and set backs. The Vallejo widow, who turned out to be a monster, refused to let me see the worksheets and Barbara nearly died from a hemorrhage after Matthew Eshleman was born. I have gone into our experiences there in detail in 'A Translation Memoir' published at the end of *The Complete Poetry*.

The fourth country that has been a vital part of my career is France. While living in Paris in 1973-74, a friend told us that we should visit the Dordogne before returning to the States. We did, and while there we discovered the Ice Age painted caves. A visit to Lascaux was one of the grand revelations of my life and I decided to mount a project on the origin of image-making via these caves (along with some in the Lot and Ariège regions as well). We returned to France as often as we could afford to over the next two decades and began leading small tour groups to the caves in order to pay our way. Studying cave paintings and engravings was like turning the personal preoccupations in *Coils* inside out: in the Dordogne I was being faced with a transpersonal world, no history, no language, nothing but image itself which I soon decided was crucial to the separation continuum in which the human cut itself loose from the animal and began to construct the fences between culture and nature.

I feel it is important for poets to have at least one big, as Charles Olson put it, 'saturation job'. I have been fortunate to have two: forty-two years with Vallejo and twenty-five with the Cro-Magnon ensouled caves.

Do I travel a lot in America? Yes and no. I lived for four years in NYC in the late 1960s where I founded and began to edit *Caterpillar* magazine (20 issues, 1967-1973). I met Caryl in 1969 and we moved to California in 1970 where I was on the initial faculty of the California Institute of the Arts for two years. Other than a number of trips to France,

we lived in Los Angeles until 1986 when we moved to Ypsilanti, Michigan, where we still live. We try to visit NYC and Los Angeles once a year as we have old friends in both places. Other than those cities, I generally only travel when I am invited to do programs at universities.

Your favourite twentieth-century British poets are Peter Redgrove and Hugh MacDiarmid. The former is less of a surprise than the latter. You like MacDiarmid's 'In Memoriam James Joyce'. I wonder could you tell us what it is about these two poets that so appeals, and perhaps about what is less appealing in other 20th-century British poets. You published Redgrove in your magazines. Did you meet him? You must be content to see a *Collected Poems* and a biography coming out as we speak.

Peter Redgrove, for my money, is the most significant English poet of the last one hundred years, and the first real visionary, as I understand the term, since Blake. His imaginative treks through the interstices of sensation and his capabilities to engage the honeycombs of creaturely life are unique. I published him in ten issues of *Sulfur*, my second magazine (46 issues, 1981-2000), and had I to do *Sulfur* over again, I would publish him in every issue. This is a man who used to wallow in the spring and who once sent me a little home-made instruction booklet on the appropriate ways to embrace trees.

Peter and I had a fairly regular and very lively correspondence for over two decades. Alas, we never met or spoke to each other. I begged John Martin of Black Sparrow Press, my publisher for thirty years, to take Peter on as an author but he simply could not dig Peter's genius. Martin was not alone. I very seldom hear Redgrove's name in discussions of who poets here are reading.

MacDiarmid: I know his work much less than I do Redgrove's. I mainly know, from two decades ago, three poems, 'On A Raised Beach' (which I once studied for two weeks straight, since it took most of that time to pick my way through the erudite densities of his vocabulary), 'In a Cornish Garden' (an extraordinary love poem that is also a detailed commentary on his wife's clothing and cosmetics), and 'In Memoriam James Joyce' (which must be one of the greatest commemorations of another writer ever written).

Here I can only touch upon the splendor and magnitude of the Scot MacDiarmid's poetry which, at large, proposes to return poetry to its original role as a charged 'giant form' responsible for the personal, social, and metaphysical aspects of a particular culture.

As for what I find less appealing in British poetry: I generally do not remember much about things that I have read that have not impressed me. But I have also admired poems by Yeats, Lawrence, Bunting and David Jones, and in the 1960s, when I made several trips to England, spent a number of hours in lively conversation with poet/scholar Eric Mottram.

Bei Dao is another poet you've translated: *Endure* (Black Widow Press, 2011). He is perhaps not as integral to you as Vallejo/Artaud/Césaire, but is a peer. Have you

met? Why is he important to you and to modern poetry? Dissent differs from place to place, so that it's hard for one dissenter to understand the raison d'être of another. What do you say to the critic who admired the finesse of your translations, but can't understand why Bei Dao is so famous?

I nominated Bei Dao for the semester-long MacAndless Chair in the Humanities at Eastern Michigan University in 1992. He was offered the position for the fall of 1993 and after his arrival in Ypsilanti, Caryl and I became his close friends. He lived in Michigan for three years and during this time we gave poetry readings together and I helped him translate some Vallejo and Césaire poems into Chinese. There are some fascinating overlays between Bei Dao's poetry and the Vallejo of *Trilce*, though I have to be careful here: I do not read a word of Chinese and until recently have been dependent upon the English-language versions of Bei Dao's translators.

In the summer of 2009, Bei Dao and I were both invited to the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado for a week. As in the past, I was asked to do a program with him. While re-reading translations of his work from the 1990s, mainly by David Hinton, I began to feel that new translations might be able to draw out aspects of Bei Dao's poetry that were not fully articulated by these earlier versions. Because I had been impressed by Lucas Klein's translation-oriented on line *CipherJournal* and knew that he admired Bei Dao's poetry, I suggested that we try working together. Lucas thought such might work so we decided to see what we could do. We determined that he would do a first draft of a poem, pointing out ambiguities and complications, and that based on this information I would do a second draft, asking Lucas about the aspects of his draft that I did not understand. And so we would work, back and forth, until we arrived at a version that satisfied both of us. After doing half a dozen versions for the Naropa reading, with Bei Dao's approval and encouragement, we decided to continue and do a small collection of thirty-one poems which was published as *Endure* by Black Widow Press in 2011.

I don't exactly know how important Bei Dao is in twentieth-century Chinese poetry but I would guess that he is a major figure there. I think that Lucas's and my translations propose a Bei Dao that should be news for American and English poets. Having been in exile since 1989 (he now lives and teaches in Hong Kong), Bei Dao has generated a tentative way of being in poetry out of homeland denial. His delicate and haunting lines radiate a spectrum of feelings that strike me as a unique existential contribution.

The Dionysian is there. The poem 'At the Speed of Wine' is a dream narrative which responds to a single poem of Hart Crane's, 'The Wine Menagerie':

Dionysian excess has, built within its boundary explosions, formlessness, violence and despair. Dionysus must, at some point in his turmoil, find the hand of Brother Apollo and swing with him, or be churned to flotsam.

Is that what happened to Crane?

My poem responds to Crane's life and work at large, not merely to one poem. Here is my visionary response to his leap from the *Orizaba*, April 27, 1932, shortly before noon. Crane is speaking to me:

'I could have continued my work for years, could have been thrashed until old age, lost my ears, even my organs, had not the 'connection' as you call it with Peggy Cowley *polarized* my work into clearly male and female contrariety. The spectre of fulfillment, of gratification, is intolerable. Those of us who wind about the never-finished Hermaphroditic body cannot tolerate that sensation of birth that swings like massive vulvular bells through heterosexual screwing. Its sensation, joyful and corrugated with dread, lifted my tower from a sunless workable gloom into a daylit presence and in that moment it snapped in two. It was my natal daemon, covered with the vermin of our Midwestern compulsion to *realize ourselves* in intercourse that drove me before death's altar in that land where more than one gringo has gone to *exercise his skeleton*. I went to the stern trying to understand why I had said goodbye to her, why all my life I had been saying goodbye to that hideous bell tower whose breasts in a phallic retort were compacted into the face of things—in the human expression of a snake, in the serpentine look of a man. My man in Havana, my man in Hell, my white serpent father whose breasts I failed to draw forth. I stood by the rail and stared into the grail that had driven and sustained me. Suddenly everything stopped. I was out of time in the fortress of the Cherub. The *Orizaba* was perched on one very tall rotten wave and, as if miles below, a dazzling light appeared, as if this were my 'opening night', as if to die is 'World Premiere.' And then the Cherub of Narcissism was at my ear: 'You are no further along your path than in the instant when you were conceived. You are merely my play, which I re-stage and re-celebrate with limousines and furs.' And then the Covering Patriarch hissed: 'It makes no difference how you carry on—we'll only talk about *you* when you're gone.' I hurled myself into that mindless ditty, to shatter its lantern mockery, its sinister pointing out to the night that 'the real show' is bodies winding out those plush caves in which psyche is, in fact to be bled...'

One thing I really admire in your work is how it responded wholeheartedly to the change in reality over the millennium, the collapse into madness, by a ruling elite who succumbed to the basest urgings of the Millennium or 'Y2K Bug' they had tried to warn us about. Your poems 'Mind Tombs' and 'The Assault' (both published in *IT* and readable on www.internationaltimes.it) go into 9/11 in a profound and desolate way. I find it hard to believe that poets don't respond to the new order of things in the first decade of the third millennium, and I am gratified and relieved to see that you do, as well as pursuing your other obsessions. Does 2012 bring you any hope that we can begin to move out of the morass?

The discrepancies between what can be perceived about the events of 9/11 and the official 'story' are so great that I am convinced that a massive government cover-up is involved. If this is so, then nearly all of us are living today inside this lie. What if the unknown truth is the lie veneer now of our dailiness, so that there is a knotted veil in our eyes building a rancour where there should be revelation?

Is this why we shit in our sleep and awake to find van Gogh's posted ear the foetal goal of our ovens?

You quote Gabriel-Desire Laverdant's ur-definition of avant-garde as 'initiator,' and 'the forerunner and the revealer' of 'the most advanced social tendencies' and how it 'must lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society.'

Do you feel avant-garde is a useful term today? Or is it a devalued coinage, a twentieth-century sex-toy? Has what some perceive as the academization of the avant-garde, and what others perceive as the gentrification of the avant-garde, led it away from its initiatory role and taken away its brutal brush? In poetry, has LANGUAGE's fetishization of the postmodern, the linguistic nihilism of the deconstructionists, led to a censorship of the poetic assault on culture, or a falsification of it?

Would you call yourself an avant-garde poet? Is there a living poet you would single out as an exemplar of the Laverdant attitude?

I found the Laverdant quotation in the Introduction to Donald Kuspit's book on Leon Golub. Kuspit proposes that a significant number of Golub's paintings 'agitate politically (in the deepest sense of the word), revealing the brutal, inhumane forces at work in the modern world.' He goes on to say that 'Golub posits no possibility of peace between the witnessing avant-garde individual and brutal society, which does not want its raw reality preserved for posterity in art; it wants only its better side to be visible to eternity, and it expects art to serve that lie.' I recognized Golub's integrity in this regard in my elegy for him, 'Monumental'.

My primary belief concerning poetry is that it is about the extending of human consciousness, making conscious the unconscious, creating a symbolic consciousness that in its finest moments overcomes all the dualities in which the human world is cruelly and eternally, it seems, enmeshed. In this symbolic consciousness I also believe that the realities of the spirit are to be tested by critical intelligence, which includes immersing affirmation in negation. I would go so far to say that the only affirmation (or praise, to put it more simply) that counts is that which survives such repeated immersions. My sense of negation would include the brutalities and filth one finds not only in the base but in the upper echelons of society. However, I think poetry is very hard pressed to lay them bare as a primary project. I have written some very ugly poems over the past several decades ('The Tomb of Donald Duck' comes to mind), and I want that ugliness, that blackness in the heart of humankind, to be part of my primary stabilizations and concentrations. But I do not want it to rule. I see it as an important aspect, no more, of the symbolic world I am attempting to create, along with my attention to the origin of image-making, art and artists, my life with Caryl Eshleman, and translation, to name several large areas of preoccupation.

I would agree with the implications of your questions that the term 'avant-garde' doesn't mean much today—but, in poetry, the Laverdant definition has never meant much. None of their poetry of the first generation of French surrealists meets the Laverdant definition. As Susan Sontag, in her fine essay on Antonin Artaud, writes: 'The Surrealists heralded the benefits that would accrue from unlocking the gates of reason, and ignored the abominations.' In the word 'abominations' is buried Laverdant's vision of the avant-garde.

So I would not call myself an avant-garde poet. I feel that the word is still overcast by the surrealists' amusing parlour games (in which no one can lose), involving a superficial sense of pleasure and freedom. The problem of attempting to focus at large on brutality and filth is that in doing so symbolic consciousness is flattened out by agit-prop and poetically-rendered journalism. There are many lies in poetry. Pretending that violence and horror do not exist is only one of them. Political conventionality in the service of memory is another.

There are moments that Laverdant would be proud of in a number of twentieth-century poets. Aspects of Garcia Lorca's *Poet in New York* come to mind, or Rexroth's 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' and Ginsberg's 'Howl'. I could also cite Césaire's 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land', Holan's 'A Night with Hamlet', a lot of the edited court records in Reznikoff, passages in the anti-Vietnam-war writing of Duncan and Levertov, certain poems by Jayne Cortez, Rothenberg's *Khurbn*, and much of Will Alexander's *Asia and Haiti*.

As you get close to your 80th year, and are magically making book after book, how do find the energy? I remember a day and evening in your company, attending a Nancy Spero exhibition, walking at length around the modernist hub of Kensington, tail-ended by a long evening in the restaurant and wine bar. You seem mentally and physically very strong. Is this natural health, or a lifestyle method? Such longevity and productivity... Any tips for juniors?

Hmmm. Basically, I think I am lucky. But my luck is involved with a healthy life style and living with a person who I love and who loves me. I could add that I have pursued relentlessly all of my artistic goals and am not aware of having compromised any of them. But I imagine others suffering poor health in their seventies could say the same thing. Caryl takes perfect care of herself, yet she suffers repercussions from osteoporosis and spontaneous vertebral fractures.

For the past twenty-six years we have lived in Ypsilanti where there are no distractions like culture, interesting cafes or restaurants. We have a few friends nearby which we see for dinners at their home or ours a few times a month. Other than shopping, walking on the gym track, cooking, and doing the laundry, I am in my workroom six or seven hours daily seven days a week addressing my writing. I miss what I take to be the art action in cities like NYC and Paris but since we could not afford to live in either place, I am simply grateful for my energy and the time I have to work here.

If there was a literal *House of Eshleman*, if it had to be somewhere, where would it be?

Breughel's Tower of Babel, Nosferatu's castle, and Bashō's grass hut aside, I suppose my House of E would be an old farmhouse in the French Dordogne. I would be doing the same thing inside it as I am doing here in Ypsilanti—but—a big but—a couple of times each week Caryl and I would visit one of the Cro-Magnon caves whose images changed our lives in 1974. And if Jacques and Christiane Leyssales were still around, and I don't know that they are not, we would, after our cave visit, drop in at Hotel Cro-Magnon for one of Jacques' champagne/poire concoctions. We would carry our glasses out under the linden on the hotel's patio fifty feet away from where the first Cro-Magnon skeletons were discovered in 1868.

Questions by Niall McDevitt