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John Logan

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## A Conversation with John Logan · *Thomas Hilgers and Michael Molloy*

JOHN LOGAN GREETED US at the front door of the home of Phyllis Thompson, where he was a guest. Logan was in Honolulu for several readings, and to celebrate his being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He knows Honolulu well, having recently been Visiting Writer at the University of Hawaii and having begun his teaching career at Honolulu's Iolani School right after the end of World War II. In 1955 the first of his six books of poetry was published. He continues to edit *Choice*, a magazine of poetry and graphics. As of this writing, he is living and writing in San Francisco, in the neighborhood of most of his nine children.

Interviewer: John, I want to congratulate you on the recent award of the Guggenheim Fellowship.

Logan: Thank you. I'm looking forward to a whole year off in which to write new and collect older poems, perhaps in a new selection.

Interviewer: Do you have any particular plans?

Logan: Well, I hope to return to Europe. I have several poems based on places in Europe, and I seemed to be turned on to write by new situations.

Interviewer: Do you find that particular locales lend themselves to your producing particular types of poems? What is the relationship between where you are and what you write?

Logan: It varies a good deal. I can't answer that question directly, except that very often there are other people involved, other people whom I'm visiting or traveling with, who get involved with the landscape somehow.

Interviewer: I'm interested in your evolution as a poet. I know that I read somewhere that you began your college career by majoring in biology, and in fact began your professional career by teaching biology. Can you tell us something about how you began to write poetry?

Logan: That was a number of years after I began teaching. I had been working on the German poet Rilke, translating him—I was actually working on a degree in philosophy and was studying German for that. The translation work was very satisfying. The nature of the German language is such that the meat of the sentence comes toward the end, and Rilke's poems are such that there's a change of key quality in them toward the end of the poem. Not knowing German very well, I found it especially satisfying to do the translating; it sort of primed my own pump. I also got some practice in the iambic pentameter line, the line which most of the Rilke poems I was translating—the early ones—used. Then, things were happening in my life which were difficult

to handle emotionally. I was teaching at a—excuse me, I was not teaching, I was working—at a hospital for black insane in Crownville, Maryland, and I was sort of moved to write as a kind of prayer or incantation for them because there seemed so little that could be done. The first poem I had published, in *Partisan Review* in January 1953, was about feeding a blind insane tubercular old black man his dinner.

Interviewer: Was there a gap of years between your beginning to write and your first publication?

Logan: I wasn't anxious to leap into print. I wanted to be sure of what I was doing. I worked mainly alone, at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. I began writing around 1949-50, at least three years before the first poem was published.

Interviewer: How did you begin to write? Did you simply work out what you wanted to say, or did you depend a great deal on poetry that you had read?

Logan: Actually, one of the first two poems of mine that were published was based on reading—it was based on a text from the Roman author Pliny, from his *Natural History*. I had been reading that in connection with my work in biology classes at St. John's College, and was very much taken by one story that Pliny relates. It has to do with a very heroic man who is very dangerous and has killed a number of the enemy, but who can not be caught himself. When he is finally caught, they throw him to the ground and open his heart. They find his heart covered with hair. That strange quality of the hairy heart, in connection with the courage of the man, made me interested, and I wrote about it.

Interviewer: Had you read many other poets whose style you learned from or tried to imitate?

Logan: No, not really. I had read a good deal of poetry, but I wasn't aware of influence outside of Rilke. I think in my third book, *Spring of the Thief*, there are a couple of poems that show his influence.

Interviewer: What do you think it was about Rilke that so attracted you?

Logan: It's his great gift of image and his own commitment to poetry. He has this marvelous group of letters published in a book called *Letters to a Young Poet*, in which he talks about the necessity of becoming one's own best critic and not continually taking one's work around to various people. One can always find somebody to approve it. It's a book I would recommend for all young students of poetry.

Interviewer: Some teachers of novice poets believe that in order to really become a poet you have to go through some sort of apprenticeship where you learn traditional forms. What do you do with your students?

Logan: There are two schools of thought on this. One of them, a traditional school, to which people like Milton and the contemporary Theodore Roethke belonged, encouraged writing in imitative forms at the beginning. But I have

found with contemporary students that the big problem is to get them to believe in their own voice and to stop echoing other people. So I don't usually use strict forms at the beginning. I try to get them to write a good deal, and to find what is unique in themselves. But I have them read a lot. Then I believe in using forms somewhat later, in order to structure what one is doing once one is free of imitative material.

Interviewer: You've written a prose work, *The House that Jack Built*, which I've heard you refer to as a "fictionalized autobiography." We don't often hear those two words put together. Yet a lot of your poetry has an autobiographical "ring of truth" about it. Some people today might call it "confessional poetry." How does your life fit into your poems?

Logan: Very often it's not really, historically, "out of life," but the gift of the poet has to do with making it seem as though it were. The important thing is not whether it happened in the life of the poet, but whether it is somehow shared in the life of the reader. That's one of the reasons I don't like the notion of "confessional poetry." I don't really believe in it because what one talks about is not primarily himself as a poet. If he has any power, he is talking about the reader too. So what is "confessed" is what is in the reader, in a sense—as much as what is in the author. An example might be my poem "Picnic." There never was, actually, such a girl as Ruth and a particular school picnic. I should perhaps not say that, because it disappoints people. It's a product of imagination. I of course went on a number of picnics, but "Picnic" is not about any particular happening.

Interviewer: And yet the moment of awakening you describe in "Picnic" is something that happens at one time or another to all of us.

Logan: Indeed.

Interviewer: Are you conscious of the reader as you write?

Logan: Oh, yes. The first audience is the listening part of yourself.

Interviewer: When do happenings in your life make for good poems?

Logan: Very often, it's an anxiety state, which one works through by writing through it. Poets have what I call the occupational hazard of poetry, which is that they don't know what's happened to them until they find the words to express it. Once you find the words, the experience is altered. If the poem works well, it brings what Dylan Thomas calls "a temporary peace," a temporary end to anxiety. This is something very much like what in religion is called "the state of grace." I think the natural equivalent of grace is the peace, or catharsis, to go back to the old term—refreshment of the inner spirit—that comes from art.

Interviewer: I've particularly enjoyed your poem "Shore Scene," and I wonder if we might use it to talk more specifically about how your poems come into being. Could you read it for us?

Logan: Sure.

There were bees about. From the start I thought  
The day was apt to hurt. There is a high  
Hill of sand behind the sea and the kids  
Were dropping from the top of it like schools  
Of fish over falls, cracking skulls on skulls.  
I knew the holiday was hot. I saw  
The August sun teeming in the bodies  
Logged along the beach and felt the yearning  
In the brightly covered parts turning each  
To each. For lunch I bit the olive meat:  
A yellow jacket stung me on the tongue.  
I knelt to spoon and suck the healing sea . . .  
A little girl was digging up canals  
With her toes, her arm hanging in a cast  
As white as the belly of a dead fish  
Whose dead eye looked at her with me, as she  
Opened her grotesque system to the sea . . .  
I walked away; now quietly I heard  
A child moaning from a low mound of sand,  
Abandoned by his friend. The child was tricked,  
Trapped upon his knees in a shallow pit.  
(The older ones will say you can get out.)  
I dug him up. His legs would not unbend.  
I lifted him and held him in my arms  
As he wept. Oh I was gnarled as a witch  
Or warlock by his naked weight, was slowed  
In the sand to a thief's gait. When his strength  
Flowed, he ran, and I rested by the sea . . .  
A girl was there. I saw her drop her hair,  
Let it fall from the doffed cap to her breasts  
Tanned and swollen over wine red woolen.  
A boy, his body blackened by the sun,  
Rose out of the sand stripping down his limbs  
With graceful hands. He took his gear and walked  
Toward the girl in the brown hair and wine  
And then past me; he brushed her with the soft,  
Brilliant monster he lugged into the sea . . .  
By this tide I raised a small cairn of stone  
Light and smooth and clean, and cast the shadow  
Of a stick in a perfect line along  
The sand. My own shadow followed then, until  
I felt the cold swirling at the groin.\*

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\*From *Ghosts of the Heart* (University of Chicago Press, 1960); reprinted by permission of John Logan.

Interviewer: What do you remember about its evolution—did it have many other versions? Where did the incident in it take place, if it took place at all?

Logan: Well, this one did. It happened that I was visiting with a couple of my children and a friend named Pat Sweeney (who later taught at Lone Mountain in San Francisco) and his young brother, Tim, in the sand dunes on Lake Michigan, I think the park that's called "Tower Hill." At any rate, I have difficulty sometimes in scenes with the sea and the sun. For one thing, I am very fair-skinned and I sunburn easily. I often don't enjoy myself as much as one would expect on an outing. But this day I was determined to enjoy myself. We unpacked the car; the kids went to this hill of sand, "The Tower," and were falling down. We made some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and the first thing I did was to bite into a sandwich and there was a bee in it! Actually, it was a yellow jacket, not a bee. It stung my tongue. It worried me a good deal, because I thought some people were very sensitive to yellow-jacket bites. I was expecting my mouth to swell up or swell shut or something.

Then I describe some scenes that took place on the beach that day: the girl building the canals which she then opens to let the lakewater in; the child who was tricked into being sanded into a pit. The last part of the poem—"My own shadow followed then, until/I felt the cold swirling at the groin"—reflects something about the anxiety of the scene, I suppose, but actually it describes the experience of slowly walking out into the water until the cold water reaches the level of the groin.

That's the literal basis of it. You always hope that there's more richness in the actual images and rhythms as they come out than in the literal story.

Interviewer: I take it, then, that what you've just said is an illustration of what you meant earlier when you talked about poems growing out of the poet's anxiety. Is the anxiety here the anxiety of a yellow-jacket bite, or do you think there's something more?

Logan: As I've said, a beach scene generally is an anxious one for me, partly because of the fear of sunburn, partly because of the Puritan inhibition about sensuality which is so present in a beach scene, and which I think it takes quite awhile to get comfortable with—but not for people here in Hawaii who are so used to the constant scene. But when you have only a couple of months a year when you can visit the beach and see the lightly clad bodies, there's sometimes some anxiety associated with that.

Interviewer: How much after the incident was "Shore Scene" written?

Logan: Pretty shortly. I don't remember exactly.

Interviewer: Why did you think that this would be a good subject for a poem?

Logan: It seemed to me it had a kind of element of experience that could be shared. There's something archetypal about a beach experience, and about some of the details—the attraction, the sadness of the boy trapped in the sand. I thought it had a number of details that would touch other people.

Interviewer: "Shore Scene" is constructed of ten-syllable lines. Why did you pick that particular form?

Logan: The syllabic form gives you a kind of minimum discipline for revising a line and for reaching ahead to discover new images. Of course, a ten-syllable line has been used a lot in poetry—I don't use it anymore because it tends to break down too easily into iambic pentameter. That's now a sort of cliché rhythm in English poetry. But sometimes one notices that some of his best lines are in a certain number of syllables, and it seems to make sense to choose to write other lines with the same number, if you can.

Interviewer: How do you know when a poem is finished, John?

Logan: William Butler Yeats said that you know when a poem is done because it "shuts, like the click of a box." I don't seem to have any difficulty recognizing when a revision is done.

Interviewer: Do you test your poems with friends before they reach final form?

Logan: Often, sure. With university colleagues. Or I often bring them into workshops that I teach, and discuss them with the students.

Interviewer: Your poems have many children in them. While that's perhaps not unusual, it's not all that common either in contemporary American poetry. Is there any reason beyond your experience with your own children that brings so many children into your poems?

Logan: There's the constant sense of life in the play of children—constantly refreshing and constantly ancient like games and dances that are paradigms of play. Their naïveté, their directness, if they haven't been stepped on when they were too young.

Interviewer: What kinds of things are you writing now?

Logan: Of the most recent poems I've done, one is about a visit to Hemingway's house in Key West. I had known Hemingway's son Gregory, in fact had taught him at St. John's College. It was rather moving to be in the presence of his father's very overwhelming marks—the furniture, which is gigantic, from Spain; the cases full of memorabilia, which they have at this house which is now a kind of shrine. I knew that Gregory had left there when he was a young boy, just after grammar school. You can see his bed, broken down, and the cases of his father's work, filling his room. It touched me, it made me think very strongly of him, so I wrote a poem about it.

There's another one. I made a visit recently to Salisbury, Maryland, to the eastern shore where there's an island called Assateague, about which there are some myths. There are herds of wild ponies there still, and I was very taken

with them, and I knew that they were rounded up yearly and the herds decimated and taken away from their wild place. I thought of this in connection with the couple I went with who were in love, with a kind of yearning that we all have for love relationships and which the yearning of ponies for their home seemed to be a metaphor for, after they had been rounded up. Let me read you "Assateague," which is for Michael and Robin Waters.

Tamar and Royce are in love.  
They run up the beach and give  
each other a hand. I walk  
behind and brood. I'll try my luck:

Grey the beach at Assateague.  
Grey the sky and grey the sea.  
A white heron whirls off now  
and a spider crab comes out

of its hole, scuds swiftly back  
having sensed a big mistake.  
I find a white plastic bit  
I had thought was a devil fish.

The washed up wood of old ships  
breaks the sand, with shells like coins  
lost from Spanish galleons  
that used to try these awful seas.

One ship torn up on the reef  
left a heritage of dwarf  
wild ponies from centuries  
before, and still two herds of these

roam the shores and live on marsh  
grasses. The round-up is harsh  
yearly, decimates the herds  
driven before the waves and winds:

Across the channel they swim  
goaded by the boys and men  
and up the beach into pens,  
pattering over moist sands

and dashing the placid salt  
pools into myriad drops.  
Roped and with spirits broken  
the ponies are driven inland

and for the rest of their bound  
lives they yearn for salt and sedge  
they fed on under the ridge  
of snow along the island edge

as we yearn for our childhood  
or the love we never had  
or else had but could not keep  
until we came to Assateague.

I hope some magazine will be interested in that. I haven't had it accepted yet.

Interviewer: You must have a much easier time having your poetry accepted now, though, than you did twenty-five years ago, when you were just beginning.

Logan: Well, yes. There were many rejections in those early years. Everybody has to get used to rejection in order to make it into a mature writing scene. *Zig-zag Walk*, my fourth book, was turned down by eight New York publishers before I found one.

Interviewer: I know one of the important things in your life is music. How would you describe the relationship between poetry and music?

Logan: I would quote Ezra Pound, whom I agree with, who (paraphrasing Walter Pater) said that poetry approaches itself as it nears the condition of music. And then (this time paraphrasing Yeats) he adds that music approaches itself as it nears the condition of the dance. So the notion of the dance is the general one there, and it makes me think of Nietzsche's notion of art as "the vision generated by the dance." Without the dance, which refers to some kind of sensual movement, you don't have the vision. That's one of the paradoxes about art.

I think that the surface music in poetry is very important. I've, therefore, called poetry "a choreography for the ear." I think without that surface beauty, one is not really taken into it to study it, understand it, look up references, follow it out. Poetry is like an extension of personality that way. We can fall in love with a person; then we want to know everything we can find out about him or her. But you don't fall in love with someone unless there is a kind of response that could be described as toward the sensual, the surface, whatever that might mean in terms of human beauty.

There's something Rilke talked about too—the connection between poetry and human response and feeling. Just as we can't ignore people, we can't ignore

poems: we have to respond to them with feeling. So Rilke said "Poetry is by nothing so little to be reached as by criticism. Only love can securely grasp and judge it." I think by "love" he means simply "feeling," whether that be negative feeling or positive.

Interviewer: That surface sensuality comes through very much to me in your reading. In fact, I find myself sometimes so taken by the music of your reading that I forget that I'm listening to something with verbal content also.

Logan: That's all right. Because one can then look at it a second time. But without the music one might not be interested in going back to it.

Interviewer: Have you worked a lot on how you read a poem?

Logan: I'm constantly reading poems aloud as I write them. I recommend that to all. Think of music. Remember that the thing that makes poetry *poetry* is something it shares with music and painting and other arts, because it's an art before it's an art of language. We tend to forget this.

Interviewer: Your own reading is to me almost incantatory. When I hear you reading I think of the notion of the poet as the person in touch with the world beyond, the frenzied prophet. Except you also give me a feeling of serenity. Have you always read like that?

Logan: Well, I guess I got better!

Interviewer: What do you get out of being on the poetry circuit?

Logan: There's a lot of satisfaction in connection with the sharing that the poetry brings, and especially the sharing involved in the reading. My title of one book, *The Anonymous Lover*, comes from something which I used to tell my students: "Poetry is a kind of anonymous loving, which occasionally becomes personal when there are those present who care to listen." So the listening occasion is the occasion for sharing that I especially am interested in.

Interviewer: Isn't that idea of yearning, searching, used in some of your poems?

Logan: Oh yes. The poem called "The Search," from *Zig-zag Walk*.\*

. . . I must not be alone  
no matter what needs be done,  
for then my search is ended.  
So now the panicked thumbs of my poem pick  
through the grill. They poke  
the lock  
and put out a hand and then an arm.  
The limbs of my poems  
come within your reach.  
Perhaps it is you whom I seek.

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\*E.P. Dutton & Co., 1969.