



Books Interview

Relation to the Absolute: A Conversation with H.L. Hix **Alex Michael Stein**

One road leads to another. (A few, it is true, lead only to the sea, but mostly one road leads to another.) I met the poet H.L. Hix through the poet David Mason. Or, rather, I have never actually met the poet Hix. He lives in Wyoming, a state of which only a few geologists and archeologists know the precise location. Our interview is being conducted by telephone. I've seen his photograph, by the way. Two or three of them in fact. He is a handsome poet. Not "handsome, for a poet," but actually handsome. Robert Lowell was handsome. A few are. I don't suppose the poetry must suffer for that fortune. Not all poetry

suffers for the fortune of the poet. Lord Byron was a Lord, and he still wrote the lines, “For the sword wears out its sheath / and the soul wears out the breast / and the heart must pause to breathe / and love itself have rest,” of which I think no honorable reader could complain.

Hix is the author of nine books of poetry, most recently First Fire, Then Birds: Obsessionals 1985–2010 from Etruscan Press, which also published his book Chromatic, a finalist for the National Book Award in 2006. He is the author, too, of five books of essays on poetry, poetics, and theory, and of several books of translations.

H.L.Hix’s most recent book, *As Much As If Not More Than* (Etruscan Press, 2014)

His aphorisms, in my opinion, are among the most invigorating pieces of poetic prose to have been written in this country in the last twenty years. “Halve the proof, triple the tale,” he writes, and “For every philosopher who praises sound decisions, two poets celebrate unsound ones,” and, “Minds like stars stay suspended in space by attraction to other stars.”

Could I go on in this way, unfettered by word count or journalistic propriety, I would write out every single one of the nearly 300 aphorisms collected into his essay “Toward a Prodigal Logic,” simply for the thrill of watching those lyric thoughts light effortlessly toward genius beneath the fall of my own fingertips. One must try to gather glory to oneself in whatever way one can, I feel.

Alex Stein: Tell me about your poetry.

H.L. Hix: I’m influenced by my sense that, from Plato, dialogue stands at the base of western philosophy, so I’m interested in how conversation might happen in poetry. I love Harold Bloom’s

formulation that “the meaning of a poem can only be another poem.” I see the poem not as the end of something, but as the beginning. The poetry I value most highly acts on me as an incitement to my own thinking and writing. That’s what I hope for my own poems, that they act as provocations, that they charge other ideas, rather than that the ideas in them pretend to some final value in themselves. I mean “charge” in the sense of electrical current or power, but also in the sense of issuing an imperative.

AS: For how long do you figure you have been a poet? I mean, at heart.

HLH: Let me fudge a little, and offer two or three different answers. The first would be a backpedaling disclaimer, lifted from Louise Glück’s *Proofs and Theories*, that the word *poet* names an ambition, not an occupation. If she’s right, as I think she is, it’s a live question whether I *am* a poet yet, or not. The second answer, the more direct one, would be that I’ve been trying to write poems, with the ambition formulated to myself at least, since my sophomore year in college. I took a British Lit. survey with Miss Wilson—God rest her soul—and I fell in love with the language of our readings. I felt clearly the spiritual power that was possible through that language. Which prompts a third answer: insofar as poetry for me is a spiritual enterprise, it has been a lifelong pursuit. My family is explicitly religious. I was brought up in a household in which things were formulated in terms of spirituality. Ethical questions were formulated in terms of spirituality. Political questions were formulated in terms of spirituality. So, too, personal and private questions. I no longer hold the particular religious views of my upbringing, but poetry fulfills, for me, some of the same functions religion once did. It is a vehicle of inquiry and a way of assessing values.

My first awarenesses of language were framed by church experiences. The sermon was the first approximation to poetry that I encountered. My family was Southern Baptist, and about twenty-

five minutes of the standard, hour-long Sunday worship service would be the pastor—or as he was often called, the preacher—preaching a sermon. This nearly always consisted of taking a short Biblical passage and interpreting it as a life lesson with contemporary relevance and immediate applicability, doing so in ways that attempted to make the lesson memorable. There might, for example, be alliteration: Jesus calls us to prayer, penitence, and penury, say. The aim was to provide some sort of succinct catch for the memory. The attention of the preachers to the ways in which a thing could be expressed was one of my first experiences of people moving out of everyday speech into some slightly elevated form of language. I don't know how many sermons I heard preached on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. You know: *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love . . . If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge. . . but have not love . . .* That text was chosen frequently, surely in part because it is itself very elevated language with plainly visible rhetorical structure, so to preach on it needs elevated language reaching to elevated language. A meeting in the middle air of idea.

AS: Apart from the familial structure in which there seems to have been a certain amount of dialogue on religious considerations, did you recall having private considerations at an early age?

HLH: I did have an early sense of seriousness that came through prayer. Sharing my family's religious beliefs entailed that on a daily basis one was to understand oneself—and I did understand myself—as literally talking to God. That's bound to give anyone a sense of gravity about language.

AS: At what point did you begin to question the necessity of praying in a language that had been given you and thinking about praying, if I'm not misunderstanding things, in your own language?

HLH: My freshman year of college I had gone off to engineering school, thinking to become a mechanical engineer and design cars. After a time, though, I transferred to a small Baptist college intending to become a Baptist preacher. But, since I was planning to go to seminary after college, I didn't want to major in Religion as an undergraduate. It seemed redundant. Instead, I double majored in English and Philosophy. That's what did it. I found myself around people who were asking the same kinds of questions I had been taught to ask, trying to fulfill the same kinds of ambitions as were implanted in me, trying, for instance, to pray, but in ways that were less formulaic, less derivative. It became clear to me that in order to be consistent about my religious views, I had to discard them. I couldn't act out my religious beliefs within the framework of something that had been given me by somebody else. It was going to have to be more in the manner that I was coming to learn through reading authors such as Kierkegaard: it had to be an absolute relation to the Absolute. As long as it was mediated by somebody else telling me, for instance, who God was or how to pray, it couldn't be authentic. Such self-interrogations ultimately led me pretty far from the origins of their impulse. It wasn't a crisis, really, just a gradual transition. I understood that I was no longer suitable for being a Baptist minister. Instead of seminary, I attended regular old graduate school. The thought of ministry gradually became the thought of teaching. The idea of sermons transitioned into the idea of scholarship.

AS: Have you had any mystical experiences, in the traditional revelatory sense?

HLH: The closest I've come, I guess, to what other people have described in that way was during the process of writing the last section of *Chromatic*. There was a period of months when my ex-wife and I were going through a difficult, stressful time. I started a habit of going downstairs late at night and sitting in the dark with a tablet and pen in hand. It became a trance-like ritual, and it felt in the moment like voices speaking through me. In the morning I

would transcribe whatever I could read of whatever I had scribbled blindly onto the pad. With that exception, my process has been investigative and textual and rational, much more about inquiry than about anything like possession. Even the moments of which I am speaking seem to me now more a matter of habit, a utilitarian recreation of optimal creative conditions, than like any kind of mystic entry into a transcendent space.

AS: Can you tell me a little more about Kierkegaard and your relation to his work? Didn't he write something like, "To love well is to will one thing"?

HLH: Yes: "Purity of heart is to will one thing." He was very interested in both elements of that assertion. "Purity of heart" seemed to him problematic in many ways. Problematic in terms of Christian theology, given notions of the Fall, and problematic, too, just given what it feels like to be a human being, with our multiplicity of contradictory desires and ideas and our sense of guilt. "Willing one thing" was also problematic. In fact, if I understand him correctly, "purity of heart" and "to will one thing" were ideals that he saw as not humanly possible. And for that reason, he became interested (as, following him, I too am interested) in the ways in which we might pursue aims that are not humanly possible. That are, in short, divine. He became interested in an idea of faith that wasn't about belief, but was about a kind of "adequation to the divine," to something larger, and more out of our control, than is mere belief.

In my reading of Kierkegaard at that time, he seemed to be saying that if there were a God, God could not be as God is portrayed in Christendom, but that Christianity is much more difficult and complex than is usually acknowledged. I was very taken by the sense of magnitude that Kierkegaard possessed in pursuit of his Christianity. Something in it resonated with my own disquiet. Even though I ultimately discarded Christianity, I had to get to the discarding by first trying to take Christianity itself with a kind of

ultimate seriousness. In order to move away from it, I had to come to see that the form of Christianity in which I was raised was, as I now see things, blasphemous. I had to recognize that it was contradicting its own standards. Kierkegaard denied the medieval belief that reason and revelation can be tested, one by the other, and that they go together harmoniously. If faith *were* always validated by reason, if the ethical and the religious *did* always coincide, then Christianity might be easy, or at least possible.

Of Kierkegaard's books, the one that had the biggest impact on me was *Fear and Trembling*. It shook up the easy sense of assuredness with which I had been surrounded growing up, the part of religion that offered guarantees. For example, one of the things we understood about God was that God wanted us to do only things that were morally good. But *Fear and Trembling*, reading the story of Abraham and Isaac, makes the simple, blunt observation that God instructed Abraham to kill his son. In terms of received morality, church morality, it is hard to think of anything more ethically abhorrent than that command. So, how was I to make sense of it? The whole super-structure I had been raised on came tumbling down in the face of that question. I was forced, in light of this tale, to realize the groundlessness of all my assumptions about God. I was suddenly, to borrow from a different formulation by Kierkegaard, "out over seventy-thousand fathoms." I was no longer standing on the solid rock that the hymns of my congregation had proposed.

AS: So then what happened?

HLH: So then began the long fall. I immersed myself more and more in literature and philosophy, and ended up studying at the University of Texas with the brilliant Kierkegaard scholar Louis Mackey. I took to heart much of his sense of philosophy: that it was not to be construed as an academic specialty so much as it was a vehicle for ongoing critical self-examination, and for the surveying and reconciliation of various ideas. That it was about

how one lives one's life. I know you share my taste for aphorisms; do you know this aphorism of Kierkegaard's? "A theatre catches fire. The clown steps to the front of the stage to announce the fact to the audience, who think it a joke and applaud. Then the clown announces again that there is a fire, but they roar with laughter and clap more loudly than ever. No doubt the world will end amid the general applause of these laughter-loving people who take everything as a joke." That was the sort of complex and subtle consideration that Dr. Mackey, by his example, suggested to me a person could worthily wrap her or his life around. I wouldn't make any claims for my *results*, but I hope my *efforts* at least have lived up to his example.

AS: This interview is going to be published in *TLR*'s "Rogue Idea" issue. What does the term "rogue idea" mean to you?

HLH: Spelling out the tenor for which rogue is the vehicle, I'd name such characteristics as solitary and predatory. But in applying those characteristics I'd want to distinguish between ways one might mean them. A rogue idea might be solitary in the sense that it defies limitations imposed by other ideas. I want to ensure that my ideas are *not* rogue ideas in that sense, not capricious and unconstrained by contradiction with one another. I *do* want my ideas to be solitary in the sense that they defy conventionality, that they make themselves beholden to other ideas, rather than to the forms of assent demanded by a group—any group—for inclusion in its membership.

Or, again, a rogue idea might be predatory in the sense that it consumes persons—their rights, their individuality—and transforms them into capital. Among such rogue ideas especially visible in the U.S. right now, belief in the rationality of the market and our notion of "free trade" are examples. I hope to be consistent in rejecting ideas that are predatory in that way. But a rogue idea might also be predatory in the sense that it consumes other ideas and transforms them. *That* is how I want my ideas to be: predatory

rogues for which ideas, not persons, are the prey. Which brings us back to the beginning of this conversation, and my desire to see the poem not as the end of something, but as the beginning.



*Alex Stein (interview) is the author of **Made-Up Interviews with Imaginary Artists**, a genre-bending collection of interviews, interview fictions, and short essays considering the art of the interview as an act of translation. He is at work on a second collection.*

*Among other notable endeavors, **H.L.Hix** teaches poetry in the **MFA program** at Fairleigh Dickinson University.*

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