

## With Patricia Marx

*I understand that you started writing poetry only in 1957. What made you begin at such a late date?*

Well, it was actually personal experience, because I had had a nervous breakdown, and as I was recovering I started to write, and I got more and more serious about it, and I started out writing almost a poem a day. It was a kind of rebirth at twenty-nine.

*What do you think caused you to write poetry after a breakdown? What was the impetus?*

It's too strange. It's just a matter of coincidence. I think probably I'm an artist at heart, and I've found my own form, which I think is poetry. I was looking at educational television in Boston, and I. A. Richards was explaining the form of a sonnet, and I thought, "Well, so that's a sonnet." Although I had learned it in high school, I hadn't ever done anything about it. And *so* I thought, "I'll try that, too. I think maybe I could." *So* I sat down and wrote in the form of the sonnet. I was *so* pleased with myself that for about three months I wrote a sonnet every day. There are no sonnets in my book. They have since been discarded. But that's the way I started.

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*When did you start taking yourself seriously as a poet?*

I think when I was published. After I'd been writing about a year and a half I started sending things to magazines, and collecting rejection slips. I wasted a lot of time on it. There were kind of two sides of me. One part was writing poems very seriously and the other was running this little fool's business, which meant I will send out my poems today to four magazines, and the mail will bring five or six poems back.

*You often mention your experience in an asylum where you wrote poetry. Did you write when you were very disturbed, or afterwards? Did you find writing had a beneficial effect on your health?*

I don't think so particularly. It certainly did not create mental health. It isn't as simple as my poetry makes it, because I simplified everything to make it more dramatic. I have written poems in a mental institution, but only later, not at the beginning.

*There is a popular notion that creative genius is very close to insanity. Many of our major poets now, such as Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke before he died, often had mental breakdowns. Do you feel there's truth in this notion?*

Well, their genius is more important than their disease. I think there are so many people who are mentally disturbed who are not writers, or artists, or painters or whatever, that I don't think genius and insanity grow in the same bed. I think the artist must have a heightened awareness. It is only seldom this sprouts from mental illness alone. However, there is this great feeling of heightened awareness that all artists must have.

*In your book, All My Pretty Ones, you quote this part of a letter written by Franz Kafka: "The books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves. . . . a book should serve as the*

*axe for the frozen sea within us.” Is this the purpose you want your poetry to serve?*

Absolutely. I feel it should do that. I think it should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt.

*Do you find that all poetry does this when you read it? Do you admire certain poetry more for doing this?*

No, not necessarily. I think it’s just my little declaration to myself. I put it in the book to show the reader what I felt, but Kafka’s work certainly works upon me as an axe upon a frozen sea. But I admire many poets, many writers who don’t do this.

*I wonder if you would further explain that metaphor*

I see it very literally as an axe, cutting right through a slab of ice. I think we go along very complacently and are brain-washed with all kinds of pabulum, advertisements every minute, the sameness of supermarkets, everything—it’s not only the modern world, even trees become trite—and we need something to shock us, to make us become more aware. It doesn’t need to happen in such a shocking way, perhaps, **as** in my poetry. I think of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, which seems to have beautiful ordered clarity. Her fish hurts as much as Randall Jarrell’s speaking people. They are two of my favorite poets. Their work shocks me into being more alive, and that’s maybe what I mean. The poet doesn’t have to use my method to have that happen to me. And Rilke, think of Rilke with his depth, his terrible pain!—

*Do you find that the writing of poetry achieves this for you as well as the reading of it?*

No, the writing actually puts things back in place. I mean, things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into

order again, and the world is again a little more sensible, and real. I'm more in touch with things.

*How does a poem come into being?*

Oh, that's a terrible question! I don't know. Sometimes you get a line, a phrase, sometimes you're crying, or it's the curve of a chair that hurts you and you don't know why, or sometimes you just want to write a poem, and you don't know what it's about. I will fool around on the typewriter. It might take me ten pages of nothing, of terrible writing, and then I'll get a line, and I'll think, "That's what I mean!" What you're doing is hunting for what you mean, what you're trying to say. You don't know when you start.

*Do you work on it a long time?*

I work on it a very long time. For one lyric poem I rewrote about three hundred typewritten pages. Often I keep my worksheets, so that once in a while when I get depressed and think that I'll never write again, I can go back and see how that poem came into being. You watch the work and you watch the miracle. You have to look back at all those bad words, bad metaphors, everything started wrong, and then see how it came into being, the slow progress of it, because you're always fighting to find out what it is that you want to say. You have to go deeper and deeper each time. You wonder why you didn't drown at the time—deeper and deeper.

*Is it a struggle or pleasure?*

Oh, it's a wonderful pleasure. It's a struggle, but there's great happiness in working. As anyone knows, if you're doing something that you love and you're struggling with it, there's happiness there, particularly if you can get it in the end. And I'm pretty stubborn. I need to keep after it, until I get it. Or I keep after it until I kill it.

*Do you discard many poems that you write?*

Well, now I think I prediscard them. I don't write them, which is one reason why I write less than I did in the beginning. I wrote a lot of unimportant poems, and now when I look at a poem, I always wonder why was this written. There should be a reason for it. It should do something to me. It should move me. I have some poems that have haunted me for four or five years, and they're unfinished and maybe they'll never be finished. I know they're not right, but it hurts not to write them. I have this great need somehow to keep that time of my life, that feeling. I want to imprison it in a poem, to keep it. It's almost in a way like keeping a scrapbook to make life mean something as it goes by, to rescue it from chaos—to make "now" last.

*In your first volume of poetry, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, you quote another passage from a letter, this time from Schopenhauer to Goethe, and it says, "It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in face of every question that makes the philosopher." I take it that you mean this courage also makes a poet.*

Yes, exactly. It's very hard to reveal yourself. Frankly, anything I say to you is useless and probably more deceiving than revealing. I tell so much truth in my poetry that I'm a fool if I say any more. To really get at the truth of something is the poem, not the poet.

*Do you find that you are more truthful in your poetry than you are to yourself?*

Yes, I think so. That's what I'm hunting for when I'm working away there in the poem. I'm hunting for the truth. It might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one, because behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life.

*You wrote for the Poetry Book Society, "All poets lie. As I said once in a poem, a writer is essentially a crook. With used furniture he makes a tree." Now how do you reconcile that with your remark about poetry being the truth?*

I think maybe it's an evasion of mine. It's a very easy thing to say, "All poets lie." It depends on what you want to call the truth, you see, and it's also a way **of** getting out of the literal fact of a poem. You can say there is truth in this, but it might not be the truth **of** my experience. Then again, if you say that you lie, you can get away with telling the awful truth. That's why it's an evasion. The poem counts **for** more than your life.

*Do you find that you often distort the literal facts of your life to present the emotional truth that lies under them?*

Well, I think this is necessary. It's something that an artist must do to make it clear and dramatic and to have the effect of the axe. To have that effect you must distort some of these facts to give them their own clarity. **As** an easy example, in my long poem to my daughter and about my mental illness, I don't imply that **I** was ever in an institution more than once, but that was the dramatic truth. The actual truth was something quite different. **I** returned quite a few times, and the fact that **I** have two children was not mentioned in this, because the dramatic point was **I** had one child, and was writing to her. It made it a better poem to distort it this way. **I** just don't mention it. **So** you don't have to include everything to tell the truth. You can exclude many things. You can even lie (one can confess and lie forever) **as I** did in the poem of the illegitimate child that the girl had to give up. It hadn't happened to me. It wasn't true, and yet it was indeed the truth.

*Are you the ultimate judge of what the truth is?*

No. There's the trouble. **No**, I'm not.

## *What is the criterion?*

I don't think there is one. I mean, people lie to themselves so much—postmarks lie, even gravestones lie. The effort is to try to get to some form of integrity when you write a poem, some whole life lived, to try to present it now, to give the impact. It's the same as with a novelist, only it's in little sections.

## *Are you ever influenced, or do you ever learn anything from critics?*

Oh, they're very disturbing. I don't know what I learn. I just want to say, "Gee whiz, kids, that's the best way I could do it," something like that. One prolific poet whom I greatly admire can hardly write a damning review without mentioning my name in connection with "mechanically had writing." What should I do? Send him a telegram? I carried one very bad review in my wallet all over Europe. The good reviews I left at home. But even over there I was still Anne. I couldn't change her. I think mostly reviewers are upsetting. You just love the praise, and you try to shut out the criticism. I don't know how much they can influence you. I don't think they always read you correctly, but you always think the ones that like you are reading you pretty well.

## *Very few women have been great poets. Do you find that there's a difficulty in being a woman and a creative artist?*

I think they are really very closely allied. I don't think it's that difficult at all. It's within a woman to create, to make order, to be an emotional, full human being. I think; perhaps men are better because they are denied this in their lives. Therefore they put more of it into a poem, and maybe if you are born with an extra amount, as a woman, it works out all right. You have enough for life itself, you have a family, and then you have some left over. It always seems to me I have too much left over. Maybe that's an ingredient.

*In one of your poems, "The Black Art," you wrote, "A woman who writes feels too much, those trances and portents" and then in another stanza, "A man who writes knows too much, such spells and fetiches." Do you think there is this distinction between the woman being the feeling creature and the man being the rational?*

I don't think so, really. I think I was lying a little bit. It is in that same poem I said a writer is essentially a crook, and we're quite together in that, the male and female. I don't think that man is the rational being, and there are some marvelous women poets who are very rational: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop. May Swenson is a very good poet and certainly not overemotional in any way. She knows just when to hold back and when to give forth. Then there are male poets who are so emotional that I don't think this holds true. Great poets know both.

*You were mentioning that perhaps the reason that more men have been great poets is that they are denied the creativity that comes natural to women, through having children. Do you think then that some kind of channeling or denial is important?*

Well, it hasn't been for me. I think that it might be so. Sometimes I think, "Oh, I'm so lonely." This is the curse of being a writer or an artist, but then I think that great artists such as Rilke have treasured this, worshipped this. And then sometimes I think I'd give it all up if I could just be comfortable and with things. I think women are essentially *with* things. They're part of the earth, and perhaps it's my own peculiar trait that I feel not part of the earth. Therefore I look at it a little more sharply. I feel a little more outcast, and it perhaps makes me more of a writer.

*That may be the dilemma of the modern woman, though—*

Oh, I don't know! Poor modern woman!

*What is your feeling about the “feminine mystique”? One is always hearing of the problems of modern woman. Do you think it’s any worse now?*

Maybe modern woman is more conscious now, more thinking. I can’t tell. Sometimes I feel like another creature, hardly a woman, although I certainly am, in my life. I can’t be a modern woman. I’m a Victorian teenager—at heart. I noticed in Europe that women are not complaining **as** much, and their lives are certainly not **as** good **as** ours. We have much more freedom, and we can speak up, and I like that. I like to speak up.

*You mentioned before that as a writer you feel alone and not part of the earth.*

It isn’t *as* a writer. It’s as a human being.

*Do you feel you are associated with any other poets?*

I am often likened to Robert Lowell or W. D. Snodgrass, and I think we **all** kind of got horn into this about the same time, writing in a certain frank style. I do find that perhaps I’m drawn to women poets because some of them have some quality that I lack. I often find myself liking a poet, for example, May Swenson, or Elizabeth Bishop, who does something that I can’t do at all, and I admire it for being **so** clear and true and having a beauty that doesn’t seem to shine from my poetry at **all**. I don’t feel **as** though I’m part of any group, because I’m too much off by myself, and not in the academic world, except that I did study with Robert Lowell for a while.

*I wonder in what way you feel his poetry influenced your work?*

Actually, this is a terrible thing to admit, but I had not read any of his poetry when I studied with him. I did not go to college, and when I was studying with him I was **so** innocent **as** not to have read any of his poems, and his *Life Studies* had not come out at the time. They came out after I had finished

studying with him. So they didn't influence me at all, because I hadn't seen them. If anything influenced me it was W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*. I had written about half of my first book when I read that poem, and it moved me to such an extent—it's about a child, and he has to give up his child, which seems to be one of my themes, and I didn't have my own daughter at that time—that I ran up to my mother-in-law's where she was living and got her back. I could only keep her at that time for a week, but the poem moved me to *action*. It so changed me, and undoubtedly it must have influenced my own poetry. At the time everyone said, "You can't write this way. It's too personal; it's confessional; you can't write this, Anne," and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission.

*I wonder what is the relationship between form and making a poem function like an axe. In what way do you approach a poem stylistically and in what way does content dominate?*

Content dominates, but style is the master. I think that's what makes a poet. The form is always important. To me there's something about fiction that is too large to hold. I can see a poem, even my long ones, as something you could hold, like a piece of something. It isn't that I care about the shape of it on the page, but the line must look right to me. About half of my poems are in some sort of form. The poems that aren't in form have a shape, just the same, even if it isn't a vase or anything that simple, but they have a kind of shape, a body of their own. There are some stories that are long and thin. They should be. There's a reason for it. I don't decide this. The story writes itself and must find its right form. I'm not talking about something that's particularly academic, or perhaps it is. It's just a little trick that I have of my own.

*Do you mean by form just the physical look of the poem?*

Yes, sometimes, but also the sound. But I think of it as something you can hold. I think of it with my hands to begin with. I

don't know what the poem will be and I start out writing and it looks wrong. I start a long line and that looks wrong, and a short line, and I play around with rhyme, and then I sometimes make a kind of impossible syllabic count, and if I can get the first verse and it's right, then I might keep on with that for four more verses, and then I might change it because I felt that it needed a new rhythm. It has as much to do with speech as it does with the way it will look on the page, because it will change speech—it's a kind of compression. I used to describe it this way; that if you used form it was like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage, and you could let some extraordinary animals out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form.

*In the same article that you wrote for the Poetry Book Society you said, "Form for me is a trick to deceive myself, not you, but me."*

I can explain that exactly. I think all form is a trick in order to get at the truth. Sometimes in my hardest poems, the ones that are difficult to write, I might make an impossible scheme, a syllabic count that is so involved, that it then allows me to be truthful. It works as a kind of superego. It says, "You may now face it, because it will be impossible ever to get out." Almost any accomplished poet can do this. The point is can you get to the real, the sharp edge of the poem? But you see how I say this not to deceive you, but to deceive me. I deceive myself, saying to myself you can't do it, and then if I can get it, then I have deceived myself, then I can change it and do what I want. I can even change and rearrange it so no one can see my trick. It won't change what's real. It's there on paper.

*Do you really set the rules to begin with?*

I don't set the rules. I don't sit down and say, "I'm going to have *a b c d e* and fourteen syllables." I work and work for the first stanza, and if it looks right and if it feels right, then I cement it. I say, "Okay, here it is." I have done this with some poems. The syllabic count is this, the rhyme goes *a b c a b c* or

however, and I follow that, and then after I've done it, and it's sometimes very hard, I may change it so that no one could look back over it and see that I had made this small conceit. Better to hide conceits like this and leave it raw. Take out rules and leave the instant.

*And this works in your best poem?*

Well, perhaps my hardest. I must say I don't do it as often now. In my newer poems I'm not using form half as much, and I don't know to what to attribute this. I don't know what it is.

*By form then you really mean the physical shape of the poem and how it sounds?*

And how it rhymes and the length of the lines. Sometimes a short line is a very sharp thing, and the breaking of a line, the breaking of the rhythm is a very important thing. I think of all these things quite magically, and not in some academic way, because I don't really know what my form is. With old poems I have to go back and study it like a graduate student, because I forget it, suppress it. I forget what I did, and that's why sometimes I keep these worksheets to look back and see what kind of little magical tricks I use to get to it.

*Over the seven or eight years you have been writing poetry, do you feel you've developed in terms of form or style?*

Well, perhaps, I would say I think the second book better written than the first and yet, in a way, I think the second lacks some of the impact and honesty of the first, which I wrote when I was so raw that I didn't know any better. In the second book I knew a little bit more about how to write, and sometimes, perhaps, I cooled it too much. I didn't let myself go enough. I think maybe this will happen in a third book, which is not finished; that there are too many poems I'm not writing, that in a way I know too much. The first book was just

kind of a miracle. I don't know how it came to be. There is some very bad writing in some of my best poems, and yet those flaws seem to me to make them even better. A little **more** honest in their own kind of silly way. There they are with all their flaws, a little more human, you might say.

*Do you find that you deal very much with the same themes? There do seem to be recurring themes throughout.*

Yes, there's the mother-child theme, and death very much, although, I think, maybe a little less. Any writer, any artist I'm sure, is obsessed with death, a prerequisite for life. I'm afraid they are quite repetitive, but I think that's all right. I don't think you need too many different themes. I could defend this, not just because it seems to be what I'm doing, but in other writers that I've loved. I could defend their repetition of a theme. I would say to have written this is a wonderful thing, about some other writer, and then I try not to condemn myself for not changing a little more, although my critics like it if I change. They want to see me broaden my scope and do something different.

*Do you find you come to an understanding or a peace with the problem that you're dealing with, through writing about them all the time?*

**Just** in a very small way, a very qualified way. There is a big change after you write a poem. It's a marvelous feeling, and there's a big change in the psyche, but I think you really go into great chaos just before you write a poem, and during it, and then to have come out of that whole, somehow is a small miracle, which lasts for a couple of days. Then on to the next.