

Words and Images in Literature and Art: An Interview with Professor John Hollander

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ABSTRACT

Professor John Hollander is a famous American poet and literary critic. This interview is an exploration of the way words, sounds, and images function in literature and art. It investigates the relations among poets, artists and literary critics with a hope to elucidate the complementary relation between creation and criticism in literary and artistic practice. The comparison between ancient Chinese poems and Western ones is also drawn.

KEY WORDS

images
shaped poems
fabulist's ingenuity
philosopher's vigor

regional poet
forms
reflection
translation



Luo: Professor John Hollander, my interview with you today mainly consists of questions about art and literary criticism. But first, the issue of comparison. I have long believed that the term comparatist is abstract and ambiguous. A real comparatist is not judged by whether he or she is affiliated with a department as such, or claims to be so. A real comparatist can see things from a broad context with a liberal mind. He is not limited in his thinking or in the way he approaches his research. This is true of you. You are not only an English professor but also a poet, a versatile man of letters, and the research you have done is not confined to a single national literature. Do you agree that you are also a comparatist?

Hollander: I probably am. I was brought up with an awareness of literature in French and German as well as English—my mother used to sing songs in both these languages even when I was young. And in high school I began to be aware of great novels in French and Russian—even though I read them mostly in translation. In college I was educated very broadly in literature; and although I am in an English department, I continually invoke a lot of other literatures in my teaching. And in my poetry, of course, as well.

Luo: You are a powerful critic though I doubt if you have ever intended to be thought of in this way. Your talent as a poet gives you a unique understanding of literary criticism, which in turn helps you in your poetic creation. Would you please say something about your “difference” as a critic?

Hollander: This is, of course, always an interesting and difficult matter. When I first decided to teach literature in a university, I wanted to put a great distance between my academic scholarship and my poetry. I didn’t want to be considered a “poet in residence” at a university,

teaching only “creative writing,” but rather a regular faculty member doing historical and interpretative scholarship. My first book of criticism, for example, *The Untuning of the Sky*, was a historical study of music as a subject for poetry in England from 1500—1700. As I have grown older, I find that my criticism comes much more out of my concerns as a poet, and that I have sometimes written an essay or part of a book that explores in a critical and scholarly way something that I was getting at in a poem some time before—sometimes, years before.

Luo: Recently you have published a book, entitled *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, which discusses the relation between words and images in poems and paintings. This semester you are giving a course on “Words and Images: The Relation between Art and Writing.” How did you develop your interest in this issue? There is a book which happens to bear a similar title, *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting*. Would you please tell us how a poet and literary critic differ from an art historian on this point?

Hollander: I had written poetry that invoked or referred to works of art—among other things—for a good many years. But about twelve years ago I began to be interested in poems that were addressed to particular paintings or pieces of sculpture—for which the art-historian's term *ekphrasis* was beginning to be used more widely to refer to modern literary texts. I wrote an informal magazine article about a number of such poems, including some by my friends, James Merrill and Richard Howard, in 1984. Then I began thinking more systematically about this question, and after more than ten years, *The Gazer's Spirit* was published. Meanwhile, also, I had been writing some poems of this kind. I had indeed seen something of the relation of poem and picture in Tang poetry (Wang Wei, who wrote poetry for his paintings, in particular). But my interest is not that of the art historian: poets will interpret paintings in imaginative ways that might displease the discipline of art history.

Luo: It is commonly acknowledged that New England is a fertile place for poems and essays, and has produced a lot of great poets and writers. What is your experience as a poet of New England?

Hollander: I never think of myself as a regional poet. I was born, and grew up, and lived a good deal in New York City. But I spent some formative years in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where there were many poets of a slightly older generation than mine, and they provided good examples of dedicated and serious works for me. And the landscape of southern Connecticut—in which I have lived, on and off, for thirty years—is important for me. I am sure that it enters my poetry all the time without my being aware of it.

Luo: You are adept in putting colors, sounds and even the shapes of objects into your poems, and therefore create a striking and unique effect. For example, in your collection, *Spectral Emanations: New and Selected Poems*, there is a series of poems with different colors as titles. The arrangement of the poems is itself very interesting. Do you mean that here the relations of or between the colors function in a combined discourse so as to indicate a single subject matter? What is your overall conception of this collection?

Hollander: The placement of the colors in *Spectral Emanations* simply follows the order of the solar spectrum: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. (Indigo is a deep blue; violet was, in my parents' generation and earlier, a seventh spectral color—it has since been dropped from the spectrum.) The relation between primary colors (red, yellow, etc.) and secondary ones (orange = red + yellow, etc.) is not significant for the poem. The point is that each is imagined as a colored flame in a lamp with seven branches—like the one in the Temple in ancient Jerusalem carried off by the Romans and then lost. This is a central image in the poem. The prose part of each section is rather like the cup containing the oil below the flame. Each of the poems has a different stanza pattern for its seven-two lines. (The number of syllables varies according to a pattern: 6, 8, 12, 10, 8, 6). The poems move from the blood of warfare to the violet of darkness.

Luo: Let's take a specific instance. In your poem, "Orange," we can find first the color, then we get the image of a huge Florida orange (the fruit) and the bright, crystalline, yellow juice dripping from it. How do you develop your ideas and images in this poem?

Hollander: "Orange" starts, yes, with an orange being squeezed

for juice at breakfast (and an orange sun rising), but then moves toward the notion of orange as the color of gold—the precious metal which may bring death to those who pursue it too eagerly. The Greek myth of King Midas with his Golden Touch, and the myth of Danae who was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold, are both worked through in this poem. It contrasts with “Yellow,” the next one, whose color represents the metaphorical, fruitful “gold” of ripened wheat, autumn leaves, etc.

Luo: We can see in literature the poets’ efforts to apply form(s) and shape(s) to their poems, as in e.e. cummings’ poem “Loneliness: A leaf Falls” and your poem “Swan and Shape.” We have this kind of poem in Chinese, too. But the number is limited. Do you think in doing this a poet will be criticized for “seeking form (or shape) for the form’s (or shape’s) sake”?

Hollander: My shaped poems started out as a kind of game, but then became very serious for me for a while (about three years). But by poetic form a great many things can be meant; form is never purely for its own sake, but is used in order to produce, frame, provide meaning. All poetry has some form; it may use it transparently, or may call attention to it. The forms may be old ones. But no poem is without form. As a teacher, I have studied form both linguistically and poetically, and am concerned with being precise in discussing it. But as a poet, I feel that form is the individual writer’s private matter. Metaphor—saying one thing and meaning another—is poetic fiction itself: this is what is most important.

Luo: I agree. But we cannot say that many poets are able to do it well. You are a master. Since you are a formalist poet, by which I mean you pay great attention to the forms of poems and try to combine forms and feelings, meanings and images through metaphors, what do you think of Roman Jakobson’s investigation of the syntax of poetry and the notion of poetry as syntax?

Hollander: I studied some with Roman Jakobson forty years ago, and he taught me a great deal about the role of grammatical elements in defining poetic style and expression. In English, in particular, the relation of rhythm and syntax is very important. I also learned much of

this from the English poetry critic, Donald Davie, (his book on syntax is called *Articulate Energy*), who recently died.

Luo: You said you were interested in, and familiar with, some ancient Chinese poets. Would you tell us who are your favorites? How did you become interested in Chinese poems and in what ways do you appreciate the words and images in Chinese poems?

Hollander: I have read translations of Chinese poetry by Arthur Waley—as well as his English translations of novels: *Monkey* and shortened version of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* [. . .]. *The Classical Book of Songs* I knew both from Ezra Pound's versions and those of other translators—Waley, Stephen Owen, Frankel, Burton Watson (Watson I knew in college) [. . .]. Wang Wei (whom I mentioned earlier), Li Po—these I had known earliest.

Luo: In ancient China, especially after the Tang Dynasty, Chinese poets tried to be painters and calligraphers at the same time; their works were usually an integration of painting, poetry and calligraphy. That's why people said that their paintings were blended with their poems and *vice versa*. Do you think this is a unique phenomenon in Chinese literature and art?

Hollander: It is far less common in European and American literature. William Blake, of course, is the major example of someone who both wrote poems and engraved them with illustrations. Dante Gabriel Rossette is another example. J.M.W. Turner wrote many poems for his own paintings. There have been many artists who wrote poetry—Michelangelo, for example; in modern times, Paul Klee. The American painters, Washington Allston and Thomas Cole, in the nineteenth century, did this, as did Marsden Hartley in the 20th century. But their poems were not placed visually within their paintings. There seems to be nothing like that great Chinese tradition that I know of.

Luo: In *Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by J.D. McClathry (1990), you are said to have added “a philosopher's vigor and a fabulist's ingenuity” to your style, and to have “invented, subjectively distorted or enhanced, fictions of selfhood and of the world as it is understood by the human mind” after you won the Bollinger Prize for Poetry in 1983. Your longer poetry “offers itself as

a masque of interpretation,” and your shorter poems are “elegant, demanding parables with a dark moral power.” How can we interpret the notion of “a dark moral power”?

Hollander: I hope these poems have moral power—if it’s “dark,” it’s only the older sense of the word, meaning obscure, puzzling, difficult. I’m afraid that many of my poems aren’t very easy to explain; but I hope that they have sufficient surface “light” to please readers enough to make them want to plunge into their darker depths.

Luo: We can see the development of your ideas about poetry through the successive “stages” of your writing. Your poems of recent decades differ from your older ones. If we divide your poetry into several periods, which period do you like the most?

Hollander: I really think that the poetry I’ve written during the last twenty years (from *Reflections on Espionage* to the present) is my best work; it gives me the most pleasure to read again now, and even surprises me.

Luo: Forgive me if my last question seems irrelevant to our main topic. You have taught at different universities; what has been your richest experience as a professor?

Hollander: Every poet who is also a teacher and scholar has to work out the relation between an academic and an imaginative life in his or her own way. I have been fortunate enough to teach at universities where the students were unusually good; the undergraduate students at Yale have been wonderfully responsive to what I try to teach them, and this has kept me working even at times when I felt sad or inadequate about my own writing. But perhaps that is because I like to explain things, and to keep on learning through teaching as well as through writing.

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