

Transcending Narrative: An Interview with Lynn Emanuel

Like the sun, Lynn Emanuel was born in the east. She lived in the small, upstate New York town of Katonah until early adolescence when, like the sun, she moved west, settling in Denver. Perhaps this metaphorical motion coupled with the early influence of a father who sculpted and painted and a mother who read aloud to her constantly as a child created within her the color, the fire, the rhythm, and the light so prevalent in her poems. To quote Jake Barnes—"Isn't it pretty to think so." If you ask Lynn to explain the genesis of her art, she will simply smile and say, "I became intoxicated with words." For whatever reason, Lynn Emanuel ranks as one of the premier poets working in America today. She directs the University of Pittsburgh Writing Program and has published three critically acclaimed volumes of poetry, *Hotel Fiesta*, *The Dig*, and *Then, Suddenly*. Her list of awards includes two NEA fellowships, The National Poetry Series Award, and The Eric Matthieu Award from the American Academy of Poets. Her poems have appeared in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology* and in *Best American Poetry*, 1994, 1995, 1998, and 1999. It was my privilege to speak with Lynn about her poems and poetry in general when she served as a guest faculty member for RopeWalk Writers Retreat in New Harmony, Indiana. Following is the text of that conversation:

What have you discovered is the most difficult thing about being a poet in today's society?

I would have to say the act of defining poetry itself addressing the question—"what is a poem?" There is an amplitude of poetic styles and ambitions in America today. No single touchstone for "the good work" exists. On one hand, this allows for a wonderful plurality of voices. On the other hand, the fact that there is no single tradition to

try ourselves against places an enormous responsibility on each of us as an individual talent, to use Eliot's terms.

Given those conditions, what keeps you coming back to the page and writing more poetry?

When I first started writing, I wondered, "Is anybody going to hear me? Ever?" "Am I waving or drowning?" I think beginning writers face this existential question: "As a writer, will I live?" It was that energy, that pressure, and fear out of which I wrote. As I got older and had published books, I realized that I was going to be part of the conversation in contemporary poetry. I was going to have an opportunity to put my oar in, to use a phrase from Kenneth Burke. The early initiative disappeared, but was replaced by a desire for change, not development or evolution—that sounds too Darwinian for my tastes—but now I had my own work to look back on, to press against, to move away from.

Some literary critics that I've read have remarked that American poetry has lost its aesthetic. It's no longer an art form, but rather a forum for multi-cultural whining. It's too involved with society rather than the abstract concept of "art for art's sake." How do you respond to that?

To me that seems to be a very naïve position to take intellectually. I don't think it's possible to read poetry, even from some distant so-called "Golden Age," and dismiss the poet's connection with society or the fact that "inspiration" has external as well as internal origins. The idea that a poet creates in a vacuum is sentimental and nostalgic. It's getting to be pretty boring, too.

So would you say that it's possible to find a balance for both readers and writers of poetry between for example, a literary elitist attitude and a literary affirmative action that excludes good poetry from one ethnic or gender group just to include mediocre poetry from another perhaps under represented

Interview

group? This question seems particularly important to me with the proliferation of MFA in Writing programs across the country because there's a lot of poetry coming from everywhere to pick from and it isn't all good.

I'd like to change the terms for just a moment. Suppose, instead of a proliferation of "programs in writing," we were to substitute "programs in music." Further, suppose we were describing something like this: Everywhere in this country people are studying music. Some of these music students turn out to be wonderful musicians and composers and perform publicly and create a great excitement and stir. And some of the students may or may not be wonderful musicians and composers, but, after they study music, they continue to play music (perhaps just for the pleasure and joy of continuing to play), or they create quartets in their neighborhoods or they teach other people in their communities to play and learn how to read and write music. And suppose we were to substitute, say, "Switzerland" for "America." All of this proliferation of the study of music was happening in Switzerland. I for one would feel that all of this study of music and playing of music was a wonderful sign of civility. I would see it as a sign of cultural vigor. I would be impressed that as many, or perhaps more, citizens of this country were studying music as were studying finance. I would expect debates about "high" and "low" art to arise (especially with so many musicians). I would also expect questions and debates about how we judge "the good," given this proliferation of musicians. But I would say that these very questions would be proof that music (or writing) was an important feature in the culture of this country. And I would find that an interesting thing.

Let's talk about your poetry specifically. If I asked you to name the first poem you wrote that made you feel like an actual poet, what would it be?

In 1972, I was an undergraduate student at Bennington College. I took a workshop with Steven Sandy, and in that workshop, I wrote a sonnet. Keep in mind that very few people—well, very few people at

Bennington—were writing sonnets in the '70s. But, he praised that poem and for the first time, a poem became solid to me, visible as an entity in its own right.

Do you see yourself as part of a school or tradition of poetry, maybe a movement?

No, not really. I see myself as a poet who, at least until now, has undertaken an investigation and complication of the issues of narrative. That's an individual process. I write narrative in order to undo narrative.

The line breaks in your poems give them a wonderful sense of downward speed and power, very similar to a tornado. You seem very adept at creating a vortex with language that sucks a reader in and makes them want to read on. Is this an intuitive process for you, or part of an intellectual calculation that comes during revision?

People often divide creation and revision into an intuitive and then an intellectual process. Revision is also an intuitive process. My line breaks have to do with the way I experience language and my own energies. And that's true even during revision. In my new poems, I'm trying to "break" my own habits of lineation, but it's very difficult.

In your poem "The Planet Krypton" you talk about America's testing of the atomic bomb at the Tonopah Artillery Range in Nevada during the 1950s, the overwhelming sense of awe and mystery and power, and maybe a fascination with the danger to humanity through the eyes of an individual, certainly the idea that the world was forever changed. Given the climate of fear and terrorism and fanaticism today, what do you see as the poet's ongoing role in society, his or her social responsibilities I guess?

In a certain sense, poets have the same responsibilities that any other citizen does. And yet, perhaps to an even greater degree that during

Interview

the Viet Nam War our public language is being fashioned into a blunt object for knocking its citizens senseless. I do believe poets should resist what I consider to be the toxic nature of our national rhetoric. I have been disappointed in most of the poems that have been written in response to 9/11. Wittingly or not, they have seemed to me to participate in the general lack of public thoughtfulness. It is not easy to resist this oppressive language. Poets may even have an obligation to keep silent if poetry becomes largely ineffectual in its resistance to this demoralization of our thinking.

In several of your earlier poems a character appears and reappears. So, to satisfy my own curiosity, who is Raoul?

(Laughter) *A character, as characters in fiction, who appears and reappears. Raoul is partly invented and partly a composite of "characters" I've known.*

Your later poems, and I'll name one, "Out of Metropolis" for example, seem to be reaching for something more than language. There is a restless, reflective quality, a forward motion toward something new, but the newness seems structured around a feeling of nostalgia, almost a paradox. Can you give me some thoughts on the direction your writing is currently taking and when did you sense a change?

My last book, Then, Suddenly—, was a fairly dramatic break from my earlier books. I don't think I knew how dramatic until I started giving readings and heard my own work out loud again and again. The poems since Then, Suddenly—are more meditative. I find myself interested in the actual site of writing: the poet at her desk, kitchen table, office and the confrontation between the writer and the effects of technology. I compose with pen and with computer. I write on the page and on the screen of the terminal. I write by moving back and forth between what I am calling the "low" or "dry" technology of the slowish scratch of the pencil on paper, and the "high" or "wet" technology of the computer where language is much quicker and seems

more liquid and impermanent. I see myself stuck between the wet and dry technologies, between two different languages or the same language produced in two different ways, and I find it very interesting.

There's also a sense of estrangement in the poems in *Then, Suddenly*—, as if the speaker is actually alienated from the life she's involved in? Could you comment on that?

I think you're right. At first, I wrote with a conscious effort not to write a book of narratives. I wanted to alienate myself from that. But, after I was finished, I realized that the poems had a resonance, an echoing of a deeper alienation that had been unknown to me. Those are the kinds of discoveries that we say make poetry wonderful. They also make poetry terrifying, dismaying, difficult.

With a bagful of literary awards, students who adore you, and the respect of your peers, what do you still hope to accomplish?

(more laughter) *At one point in his life, Giacometti, the sculptor, said that the only thing he desired was the sensation he got from working. I do think that at this point the thing that really deeply interests me is writing the book—the book unlike the other books. I want to find a way to think more fully in poetry.*