

INTERVIEW WITH OLIVER RICE
by Tom Gilbert, founding editor of the zine *Creekwalker*,
where the document originally appeared

Gilbert: Let's begin, Oliver, with some comments about your poem "A Stage Set for Mortal Candor." I'm intrigued by the way you weave real time and the real world with essential human experience into a briefest three-act scenario.

Rice: Thanks, Tom. My idea was to portray the working circumstance of almost any serious playwright. Actually, to me this suggests a backdrop for any creative writing. The "mortal candor" in the title is my rather confrontational manner of saying we're into the right stuff here. And insistent images from the common world is my declaration for everyman --- whether he farms in the Ozarks or curries thoroughbreds in the Bluegrass.

Gilbert: The modernity of the style in this poem is evident, but I do not identify any single influential voice. What authors do you most admire?

Rice: I have a piece I call a poem in which I extol the authors who impress me as the most formative tonalities of contemporary art --- Baudelaire, Chekhov, Kandinsky, Woolf, Stravinsky, Eliot, and Auden. And I sometimes hear a quiet prompting from Williams, Hemingway, or Bellow.

Gilbert: I do believe I hear a touch of Baudelaire in your poem "Untitled Thirteen", and a whisper, perhaps, of Bellow. Otherwise you sound just like yourself.

Rice: Well, I wouldn't want to be thought too derivative.

Gilbert: Behind these declarations I sense some significant theorizing. What do you say to that?

Rice: Of course, I would like my poems themselves to exhibit my persuasions about craftiness. But among persons who are not quick to think me pompous, I occasionally hear myself saying "Poetry is a liberation of thought and language from complacency on the one hand and juvenile or surrealist exhibitionism on the other. From this perspective, the devices and nuances of poetry are probes into the ambiguities and cruxes of life in search of clarification." Or I might quote Proust saying "Art is the opposite of habit and banality." Or paraphrase Stevens saying "A poem should divulge itself almost successfully." I may speak of the integrity of the line, its weight and coloration, its fitness for afterthought, whether one word or ten. Or I may recommend as audience Eliot's Hypothetical Intelligent Man. Unhappily, I may render a diatribe against the pseudoclassical fetishes of formulaic meter, rhyme, musicality, and iconic verse forms such as the villanella. All of which supposes an extremely limited audience. That is the risk one takes in support of a worthy cause.

Gilbert: We certainly know about that. So now we come to the question of how you became the poet you are.

Rice: I entered college with no idea that there was such a thing as intellect, my youthful energies having been absorbed by country-town lore and manners, by sports and music. Even through college, as a dedicated music major, I recall no significant response to the matter of any formal course, including English and American lit. Out of awakened curiosity, however, out of an aura emanating from the library, from two faculty and a half dozen provocative fellow students, I emerged into the Naval Air Corps with a vague but enticing notion of what I would later understand to be a liberal education.

For two years, when the weather closed in on the flight line, to pass the time, deprived of a piano, I committed juvenilia in a pocket notebook.

Which, in the same vein, I continued during the next two years or so of blundering about as I accepted my incapacity for a meaningful career in music, until one afternoon on a golf course I had an inspiration. I would go for a graduate degree in literature --- modern American, because I was already musing on the first of four novels I would attempt before recognizing that I had too little voice for story-telling prose, and because I was carrying with me everywhere an anthology of modern poetry.

Gilbert: That's going to sound familiar to a lot of people.

Rice: I'm sure.

Gilbert: Please go on.

Rice: New chapter now. In graduate school I had a severe tendency to neglect my course work and go wandering into whatever esoterica tempted me, which could have been self-defeating but which led to what I am unembarrassed to call an epiphany in my personal world. Reading somewhere in symbolic logic, I stumbled into what I think of as "a sense of the trope," that amorphous, deeply intuitive measure by which one is assured that language has become poetry. It is still my essential dictum.

Through the remainder of graduate school and my instructorships in a couple of universities, my first poems were published in several journals.

Gilbert: Good. I'd like to see them.

Rice: Nope. Then came an era in my life which seems to belie the common observation that poets frequently mature early and exhaust their inspiration by midlife. I

was persuaded away from academia by a series of jobs with educational corporations which took me around the world and presented me with such challenges that for some twenty years I wrote little except in the conduct of business.

Gilbert: Really? Didn't that disturb you?

Rice: Absolutely. All that time, memories of the poetic act flickered in my conscience as the most esteemable, gratifying, impeccable occupation I had experienced.

Gilbert: All right. We know there's a happy ending. What happened next?

Rice: Asked, upon my retirement, what I intended to do with myself, I answered that, since I was finally in repossession of my mind, I was going to turn it loose and follow it wherever it wanted to go. To my immense pleasure, my "sense of the trope" had been lying in wait, intact, even somehow enriched. From then to now, I am having my true career.

Gilbert: That's inspiring. Really. To continue in that line, what can you say about your working methods?

Rice: I imagine that many poets proceed much as I do. Provoked by a subject, an evocative line, a structural device, I begin accumulating potential language at random, postponing draft decisions until I better understand how the piece wants to present itself, in a sense, working from inside out, steadily holding to tones and contours that recommend themselves and feeling my way toward effective opening and closing verses. In this process I find very useful a kind of journal I have kept for years, consisting of whatever adroit expressions or vital information I happen to think of or come across in my reading or listening --- evading literary theft by ample paraphrase.

Gilbert: Poetry can lose its way through self-indulgence. In contrast, your work conveys an impression of intelligent rootedness in the perceivable world.

Rice: A very interesting and complex matter. Despite its hazards, such indulgence can be an advisable, even essential aspect of experiments in locating a personal idiom, and in its ongoing evolution. Perhaps one cannot reach his fuller achievement as an artist without at certain moments recklessly trusting his talent.

Gilbert: You lived and worked in Singapore during a period where, in your leisure time, you collected, co-translated, and edited a bilingual volume of modern Malay verse. What influence did that experience have on your writing?

Rice: My temporary residence at two sites in Africa and the one in Southeast Asia contributed vastly to my perception of the kinds of things that happen in a life, made me feel more worldly, and provided me with vital points of comparison between foreign cultures and my own. In time, with the aid of appropriate research, I felt more secure in responding to one-world settings.

Gilbert: That is evident from scanning a list of your publications. And that list promises wise advice young poets would be eager to hear from you. Yes?

Rice: I'm sorry you ask, because I want to say nothing or to be very honest, which will sound forbidding. First, therefore, I must admit to my complacent belief that making poetry can be the loftiest of human activities. Here, however, are some somber observations.

Masses of people write well in prose, because there are almost universally accepted standards and even some rather widely held variables for preeminence. Veritably no one can definitively describe the novel --- or poetry --- or creative writing, for that matter --- "creative" meaning overreaching the standards, but in unstated ways. Yes, one can say to a student poet "acquaint yourself with what has been and is being said, and in what manners, so that you know what originality is." Not easy, but more or less doable. One can define an array of literary terms. Can identify worthy models to emulate and point to some ways in which they are innovative --- "emulate" meaning copy, which process may be only very minimally creative. One may praise aspects of the student's early work which have flair. But then what is there to do beyond sending him back to his lonely room with admonitions to write, write, write.

He is on his own in a search for his natural subject matter and a distinctive voice.

No one "knows" what a "good" poem is except the poet himself, perhaps, the editors who consent to publish it, and the readers who come to admire it because it fits with their preconceptions --- rigidities like my own which I described earlier in this interview. Dozens of editors may already have rejected the poem. Millions will shrug if it is brought to their attention.

Furthermore, there is almost certainly not a living in it. No book of poems has ever been a best-seller. Even the magazines that pay at all offer pennies per hour for your labor. The culturally disgraceful circumstance in the current epidemic of lottery-like contests mounted by literary journals for their own survival is that the poet is petitioned to subsidize his own gratuitous enterprise..

Gilbert: All that is true, Oliver, for the great majority, but there are some exceptions.

Rice: Yes, and deservedly so. One in ten thousand aspirants, because of supreme talent, coincidental exposures, and the mysterious workings of reputation, find early and lasting reward. Their ear for expressivity has coincided with that of a segment of cultivated readers, with whom they enjoy a consensus of regard. All honor to them. Even they, however, often must look elsewhere for groceries.

The final good words for young persons who find unfinished poems in their heads are: learn to accept the likelihood that you are working for glory, not money, and cherish your nobility of character --- persist, persist, persist --- and trust your talent until it prevails or decides to give way to a more promising gift.

Gilbert: On that hopeful note, Oliver, shall we wish all poets, editors, and readers of poetry, including ourselves, a great new year?

Rice: Excellent idea, Tom. And thank you much for the opportunity to address whoever this very enjoyable conversation reaches.

—Special thanks to Tom Gilbert, founding editor of *Creekwalker*.