

New Directions
Eliot Weinberger Interview
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ND: You have a fascination with the concept of "the exotic," which has become a controversial topic after intellectuals like Edward Said have attacked exoticism in art. What is it about "the exotic" that you are trying to explore?

EW: I've never understood what's wrong with the exotic. After all, most cultures have stories and poems that are about long journeys— about people going on long journeys and the strange things they encounter. Fascination with the other is universal.

What's happened, however, is that, in the kind of politics that predominate in universities, they've taken Edward Said's book— which is, of course, tremendously important, but it's about a very specific place and time, and very specific genres of art and scholarship, which were named Orientalist long before Said-- they've taken Said and applied him to any sort of encounter between anyone or anything from a Third World culture and anyone from the so-called West. In fact, Said's Orientalism— as he himself was the first to say— doesn't translate into the Western experience of China or India— let alone Latin America or anywhere else.

There is this academic conflation of economic realities and the arts. If Ezra Pound puts Chinese characters in the Cantos, it's not the same as running a sneaker factory in Indonesia. Intellectual curiosity is not economic exploitation.

ND: So you think it's more the academy that has a problem with this so-called exoticism than actual artists and writers?

EW: Well it's hard to draw the line these days between the academy and actual artists. In the academy, identity politics has replaced any kind of politics known to the rest of the world. So they've invented this idea of authenticity: that one can only talk about where one is personally coming from, and only the people coming from a culture are able to talk with any authority about that culture at all. This strikes me as totally deadening in terms of imaginative literature, and also utterly unrealistic: Would you rely on any random American for a trenchant analysis of the USA?

ND: Where would you say the Araki Yasusada controversy fits in to that?

EW: That was a complicated one because it was the real poetry of a fictional character, and of course it wasn't immediately revealed as such. I was the one who spilled the beans. I've always thought of Yasusada as the great poet of Hiroshima, but also its most unreliable narrator.

ND: Your revelation of Yasusada being fictional was done very casually. How were you able to determine that Yasusada was not a real person?

EW: There were a lot of clues there, hiding in plain sight, because he was talking about people and things he couldn't possibly have known about. And also because the main influence on the actual work itself is not Japanese poetry as much as Japanese poetry as it

was translated by the great translator Hiroaki Sato, who translated haiku and tanka into one line, instead of three lines for haiku and five lines for tanka. He's the only person who's done that, and in a certain style, and it was clear that the author of the Yasusada poems had read a lot of Japanese poetry in American, particularly Sato's, translation, and not in Japanese or any other translation.. So that's how I figured it out.

ND: So, certain stylistic things?

EW: Yeah.

ND: Did you not know Kent Johnson [supposedly the creator of Yasusada] before this?

EW: No, though we've met twice since. And also I was talking about it in the context of so-called witness poetry. There had been that big anthology of witness poetry, and the idea that you had to actually have been in World War II to write about World War II. This whole question of authenticity, which is a denial of the imagination. I mean, Dante didn't go to Hell.

ND: Yes, authenticity has been a huge theme in recent memoir writing. You have people like James Frey and J. T. Leroy who have been outed for making things up and trying to pass it off as autobiography. Do you think there is a line of what is acceptable and what's not? Do you hold other writers to your standard of everything being independently verifiable?

EW: That's tricky because all memoir writing is ultimately fictional anyway. So then it becomes a question of: Are you creating an entirely fictional persona, who you claim to be yourself? And— as in your examples— are you marketing yourself as such? Both of those notorious hoaxes are about a very public author— as "Yasusada" was not— and not about the work.

ND: Is it marketing or the academy who makes those distinctions? There are a lot of writers who write things that can't be called necessarily fiction or non-fiction, people like Bolano or Sebald.

EW: Well, all of these boundaries have certainly been blurred in so-called postmodernism, but what interests me in terms of writing essays is blurring the formal boundaries, because the essay has been stuck in basically the same format for centuries. So what you can do with the essay form itself— the blurring of those boundaries— interests me much more than the fiction/non-fiction boundary, which has become something of a cliché.

ND: So how has your writing developed since you started writing essays?

EW: It really hasn't developed at all. I recently came across a box of old papers of mine, including a report I did in junior high school, during a brief period of exile in suburbia. I had a wonderful teacher who was fired in the middle of the year for being a Communist. I did two reports for her, complete with the required illustrated cover. One was on fallout shelters-- those were the days of fallout shelters-- and the other was on the John Birch Society. Both of

them were stylistically exactly as though I had written them yesterday— a kind of documentary prose poetry— though my vocabulary is now slightly larger. I couldn't believe it. Basically my style has not changed, let alone developed, at all. I was completely unaware of this. It's both moving and depressing. Everything was already in place at age 12. Or, to put it another way, it had gone as far as it was going to go.

ND: And where is your work going now?

EW: Probably back into the fallout shelter. Though I'm trying to get better.

ND: Talking about process, I was wondering how you title your essays? In particular, the book *Oranges and Peaches for Sale*— how you chose that title?

EW: That started out as a project in Mexico. Some years ago, the great Mexican photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo, was given a few million dollars by some foundation to assemble a photo collection. (These kinds of things only happen in Mexico!) After his death, they decided to do this project where they took a hundred photos from the collection and assigned one photo each to a hundred writers, asking them to write a text about that photo— not a critical text, but some sort of text. I was assigned this photo taken by an Australian who was in Mexico during the 1930s named Anton Bruehl, who went on to become a fashion photographer for *Vogue*. It's a photograph of a street vendor in Mexico City, selling oranges and peanuts, so I wrote a text and called it "Oranges and Peanuts for Sale." And then when it came around to putting together a new book, I thought it was a great title for a book of essays, instead of the usual *Reconsiderations*, or whatever books of essays are normally called, and then got the permission to put that photo on the cover.

There's a great New York story that goes along with it. About a year before, my wife got into a taxi and found a wallet full of credit cards and a lot of cash. She tracked down the guy, who was leaving for China the next morning and was, needless to say, incredibly grateful. He was a gallery owner, and turned out to be the one who held the rights for the photo. So when ND asked for permission, I told them to remind him about the wallet— and he ended up giving it to us for free.

So I thought that was a good title for a book of essays, and I think the cover is beautiful. It's one of those cases where the cover is much better than the book.

ND: It's more that you like the sound of it than anything else? Because there's an essay after called "Epstein: Exote" and I thought that those two essays worked together. Is that intended?

EW: I guess, if you think so, that's good. And another reason for the title is that the majority of the pieces were commissioned, so I thought: these are my little oranges and peanuts for sale. The one on Mitch Epstein was for a book of his photos, so there's the photo connection.

ND: Were they placed next to each other on purpose?

EW: I hate to say this, but I think it's chronological, within genre categories.

ND: The essays in your books have often been previously published in many different sources, and I've noticed repetition of certain themes and even facts and phrases...

EW: There's not supposed to be.

ND: Well, I was wondering if that was a particular strategy.

EW: Um, not exactly.. In *An Elemental Thing* things repeat on purpose, but in the other ones they're not supposed to.

ND: In your introduction to Borges' non-fictions you talk about his use of repetition.

EW: Oh yeah, he repeats things quite a bit. He'll lift whole paragraphs. But I try not to do that.

ND: How did you get into translating Borges and Octavio Paz?

EW: When I was thirteen I wanted to be an archeologist, and for some reason I thought that I was going to be an archaeologist in Central America, so I was reading all the books I could find about the Mayas and the Aztecs and so on. I was in a high school with a really good library. And accidentally stuck inside of some fat book on the Aztecs was this little pamphlet, published by New Directions of course, which was a translation of Octavio Paz's poem "Sun Stone", translated by Muriel Rukeyser. At the time, ND had done a series of tiny little square poetry books. So that was the proverbial book that changed my life. I hadn't really read any poetry before that, but I saw that the poem was based on the Aztec calendar and I knew about the Aztec calendar, so I thought I'd check it out. That was the book that made me want to become a writer. (If you talk to lots of writers, you'll find that for many of them it was a New Directions book that started them off.) Anyway, in high school I was translating poetry as way of learning how to write poetry, and I was translating a lot of Paz, but also Lorca, Neruda, Vallejo, and so on. And then when I was eighteen, I met somebody who knew Paz, and I said, "Oh, I've got all these translations sitting in my drawer.," The guy sent them to Paz, and Paz liked them a lot and asked me to translate a book. I was a teenager, I had dropped out of college after one year, and I was a hippie with nothing to do. So now I could tell my parents that I had something to do-- translate a book by Octavio Paz. That was okay, and that's how I got started. And I ended up working with him for more than thirty years, until his death.

ND: Did you already know Spanish or were you learning it?

EW: Well, I was learning it, and then I took a fantastic trip when I was sixteen. I spent three months in South America. Did you ever see the movie of Che's *Motorcycle Diaries*? I did that same trip-- not knowing at all about Che-- but in the opposite direction, and not on a motorcycle, but just hitch hiking and jumping freight trains. When I saw that movie it was incredible because we had gone to the exact same places: sleeping in the mining camps, and so on.

ND: What inspired you to start hitchhiking in South America?

EW: I wanted to go because it was there. I went with a friend of mine who was also sixteen. And basically we were so naive that nothing bad ever happened to us-- people kind of took care of us along the way because we were such total innocents. It was like Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure.

ND: So that essay in Karmic Traces about seeing a mysterious figure in your travels...

EW: Oh yeah, that was on that trip. That's in the Atacama desert in the north of Chile. We ended up in this ghost town.

ND: Are you still working on translation?

EW: I stopped about ten years ago, though I still translate Bei Dao. Luckily he only writes a few poems a year, so it's not much work.

ND: Do you still read all the books coming out of New Directions?

EW: Absolutely, though I'm a little behind... New Directions and Penguin Classics were my education, since I didn't go to college. For me, ND was the Temple of Literature. I thought anything published by New Directions was something I had to read. That started early, when I was a teenager. I also went to the Eziversity-- though I never met Pound-- the Ezra Pound program for what you need to know to become a poet. I followed that religiously too.

ND: What is that?

EW: Well, you're supposed to read all of English poetry in chronological order, and then you fool around with Provencal. You learn Chinese, of course. You learn enough Italian to work your way through Dante. You translate a lot. It's basically a program you follow to about age 30, at which point you're ready to begin writing poetry. By the time I turned 30 I realized I was a really terrible poet, but I could take the things I learned and apply them to writing prose. I was suddenly much happier. And of course I continued translating poetry. Strangely, in some other countries they think that what I write is poetry, and it gets anthologized as such. But I don't care about those distinctions.

ND: I have a question about your essay "The Present"

EW: Oh, that's an obscure one.

ND: For some reason I really like it.

EW: I think you're the only person who's ever liked it.

ND: I doubt that. But I was wondering about the device you use where you're talking about famous politicians and people without using their names.

EW: That was a long time ago, but I guess the intention was for some kind of timelessness. It's about the present, but by leaving out the names it makes it more timeless. I think, in that case, the names would have become a distraction. Of course, in something like "What I Heard About Iraq," which is much more documentary, I had to name Donald Rumsfeld and

so on. But, otherwise, as soon as you see the name, the reader brings so much baggage to that, a whole web of associations with that name. Once you strip away the name, you can begin to see what they said and did in a kind of vacuum of context.

ND: That seems like a similar strategy as "What I Heard About Iraq" where you're repeating a particular way of framing things.

EW: That was different, because I was trying to reconstruct the history of the Iraq War in a moment of collective amnesia, when all the lies about Weapons of Mass Destruction etc. had been conveniently forgotten.

ND: You've talked about the difference between the relationship between politics and writers in America vs other countries. How has being an American influenced your writing?

EW: I'm a New Yorker, not an American!... Anyway, I end up writing about things like politics for publications abroad, because they're the ones that are going to be interested in publishing someone like me on politics. America is the only country without the idea of a public intellectual coming from the arts, as opposed to some think tank. Literary writers are supposed to write their poems and novels, and are otherwise invisible on any other subject. Whereas in the rest of the world, poets have columns in newspapers, they're on the op-ed pages, they're on tv all the time, they're being interviewed on political and social and cultural matters. And I think that helps the work, because they're more plugged into the society at large. American writers are extremely cut off, especially the ones that are in the creative writing schools. If you're looking in general, sociologically— and not at individual cases— foreign writers have a much better position in their worlds. As George Oppen would say, a place to stand.

ND: What has led to that relationship with writers in America?

EW: America's the only country that doesn't take nationalistic pride in its cultural producers. (I'm repeating myself, but it's true.) Take New York City. Is there a statue or anything named after the great 19th Century writers who lived here? There's no Henry James or Herman Melville. There's a Walt Whitman shopping center on Long Island, or something like that. Can you imagine, in France, the idea of nothing named after Balzac, or Zola? In any other country they are aware of their most important writers or artists, including poets, because it is a matter of national pride. I remember getting into a cab in Bogotá and the cab driver boasting to me that Álvaro Mutis, the Colombian poet, had just won a big prize in Spain. That doesn't mean that he's reading Álvaro Mutis, but it shows a belief in national culture.. Before Obama, it's hard to imagine an American politician who could name a single living American literary writer, other than Stephen King or Dan Brown. (Maybe Clinton knew a few.) In Mexico, the president goes to museum openings and literary prize events. I've met three or four of them, but have never met an American politician, no matter how lowly.

ND: I heard that Obama read Netherland during his first month in office.

EW: My favorite Obama story is that he's on the phone with the president of Argentina, and he says "Argentina, what a great country. I've always wanted to go there, because I'm a huge fan of the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar." Borges is pretty impressive for a politician, but Cortazar? Incredible.

ND: What do you think it is about America that we don't care about our writers?

EW: I think it comes from the Calvinist tradition that art is a waste of time. It's only not a waste of time if you can make real money, or win a big prize— which is how the arts are mainly reported. Or, in the new instant celebrity culture, if you're super good-looking. When you have something like the PEN Festival in New York, the place is full of foreign journalists filing long articles on the panel discussions etc., and not a single reporter from the NY Times or any other American paper.

ND: Your piece "The Month of Rushdies" was one of my favorites in Outside Stories and in your work. I had heard of the events that followed the publication of Satanic Verses, but, having been only three years old at the time, I had little understanding of the scope of the controversy until I read your article.

EW: And they were really rioting over the mistranslation of the title of the book, not the book itself— that's the great irony.

ND: So I just wanted to ask you about that experience.

EW: There were so many false things being said on both sides, so I thought, let's recreate this history of what's actually been happening in the Rushdie case. The opponents of Rushdie were various kinds of fanatics using Rushdie as a pretext to rally their troops and so forth, but the defenders of Rushdie, in a way, seemed almost as bad. There was a kind of self-righteousness of these people in Soho saying "We're all Salman Rushdie," which of course they weren't. So both sides didn't come out very well in the Rushdie case, and it was interesting for me to cut through the rhetoric and just present the facts of the case.

ND: Was there a specific purpose behind the plural on Rushdies in the title?

EW: I guess because there were so many different Rushdies, including all the changes Rushdie himself went through. It all takes place in a month, from the fatwa on, so it's also a play on "a month of sundays."

ND: I was also wondering what you thought of VS Naipaul, though that's a random question.

EW: I think Naipaul is a great writer, and what he is best at is an evocation of place. I don't think he's such a good novelist, except for the early novels, because he's not good at creating characters or coming up with interesting narrative. He's not very good at writing dialogue, because they all sound like VS Naipaul talking. (Also known as Woody Allen Syndrome.) But the kind of evocation of place, especially in the non-fiction— the landscape, the atmosphere, the milieu— is just better than anyone. Needless to say, I don't share his political opinions. But as a writer I think he's a wonderful. And curiously, I know a number of young Indian writers, and the person they have the most trouble not imitating is Naipaul. Naipaul is much more influential than Rushdie. You like him?

ND: I read a lot of his books and wrote about him in college. My best class in school was a

postcolonial lit class.

EW: The non-fiction is great.

ND: Yeah, I used both in my writing. I wrote about how he tries to create himself within his books. He's quite a controversial figure.

EW: And a monster! I haven't read it yet, but there's this confessional biography, a new kind of genre. He authorized this biography, and then gave the guy access to the most damaging information. So it's completely confessional, but it's a biography and not an autobiography. The confessional poets should have thought of that, and spared us a lot of bad poetry.

ND: He actually taught at my school, and I found some essays written by his students and he sounded completely awful.

EW: I read an interview a long time ago when he was teaching at an American university, it must have been Wesleyan, where he was asked, "So what's it like to be surrounded by all these bright young students?" And Naipaul says, "They're bright?"

ND: That sounds about right. But it brings up an interesting question that we've touched on a bit, which is how do you separate an author's work from his personal life? And is the biography of an author important to his work?

EW: Well, one of the problems is that if you love modernism, most of the major practitioners were monsters in one way or the other. They're racists, they're anti-Semites, they're misogynists, they're Stalinists, they're fascists of one stripe or another. So you have to separate the dancer from the dance. How can you not? And the idea of completely dismissing the work because of the author's racist, misogynist or political views is really kind of pointless.

ND: But it becomes the focal point of a lot of media attention, especially with someone like Naipaul. Do you think that's just a distraction?

EW: It's also somewhat different because Naipaul is the major character in the writings of Naipaul. But it's true that often when you read the biographies of poets it can be difficult to read their poetry for a while after that, because the person is awful, or you somehow see their work in a different and unflattering way. Sometimes it's better not to know.

ND: Well, a lot of your work deals with the biographies of poets, like your essay about MacDiarmid delves pretty deep into his life.

EW: It was interesting to me how MacDiarmid produced his stuff. It's so bizarre. And I was talking about his writing life, not whether he beat his children.

ND: Or the essay about Gu Cheng, where all these horrible things are happening in his life, but you treat his life and his poetry as different things.

EW: He's obviously the most extreme case. Certainly the only ax-murderer I ever met.

ND: So how does the fact of him being an ax-murderer affect your reading of his work?

EW: It certainly affects your reading when you see all the violent imagery. It's difficult to try to read him without thinking of what the end of the story is, to somehow recuperate what it was like to read Gu Cheng before all the violence occurred. But it's worth trying. He's a tremendous poet.

ND: You talked a little about fiction, and I was wondering if you read fiction and what you think about writing fiction in general, or specifically American fiction.

EW: I almost never read American fiction, because what I like about fiction is precisely exoticism. I like to read about things I don't know about, so I'd much rather read a Japanese novel or a 19th century novel, then read a novel about a couple getting divorced in Connecticut. If I want to know about that I can make a phone call. I've never understood these perfect, detailed recreations of suburban life, which I suppose come out of the "write about what you know" MFA mantra. I'd rather write about what I don't know— though I try to find out about it.

ND: Do you listen to a lot of world music? What do you think about the term world music?

EW: I can't say I'm an expert at all, but I know a little about African music, I mean African pop music. Basically because I'm a fanatic for African-American music from about, say, 1960 to 1975. I'm just this side of total nerd-dom on the subject. And it seems to me that where you get the same kinds of things that R&B once had, you get in African music now.

But do you mean world music in the sense of Africans going to Paris to record?

ND: I mean like the record label Putumayo or something like that.

EW: Why, do you think it's cultural exploitation? As long as it is broadening horizons, I think it's fine. It may be foreign culture L-I-T-E at the health food store, but it's better than the Hollywood Strings doing "Yesterday" at the supermarket.

ND: I got a lot of shit for playing congas in a salsa band in college.

EW: Why can't an Anglo guy play salsa? Of course he can. I mean, why not? Whether you can play it well is a different thing. But I don't think by definition it's exploitation, anymore than a Cuban guy who sings American standards, or a Japanese country and western singer.

There's this false thing about cultural hegemony. It only applies to the United States. For example, the most popular television programs in the world are Brazilian telenovelas, but nobody ever talks about Brazilian hegemony. Until twenty years ago the most popular movies were Hindi movies and Hong Kong movies, but nobody talks about Hong Kong hegemony. The whole idea of hegemony only applies to things that come out of the United States. Why should you as an Anglo be doomed to singing only Appalachian folksongs or Broadway show tunes?

ND: I think it has something to do with the economic exploitation that has come from America in Third World countries.

EW: Playing congas in your college band is not the same thing as running a mining company in Chile. And in the era of the multinational corporations, it's not necessarily Americans running it anyway. And of course in your case it feeds the music. Having played congas helps to inform whatever music you're making right now.

ND: Thanks I feel a lot better.... No more questions.

EW: Then I'll tell you a great story. Not for the interview.