

FROM INSIDE THE SICKROOM:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES HUGHES

JEREMIAH WEBSTER

**Jeremiah Webster:** *First, congratulations on the publication of *Cave Art* (Wiseblood Books). What kind of aesthetic decisions did you have to make for this collection?*

**Charles Hughes:** Thank you. Probably the first thing to say is that the poems in *Cave Art* are, for the most part, metrical (which is to say, written in iambic pentameter or another traditional English meter) and some of them rhyme. At the same time, it wouldn't be quite true to say that using meter and rhyme was a conscious decision on my part, since I'm not at all sure I could write poems without them. If I were to throw a baseball (not something I find myself doing much nowadays), I would throw it right-handed, without consciously deciding which arm to use. We write what—and how—we can.

Of course, decisions need to be consciously made in the writing of a particular poem. What meter? What, if any, stanza form? Whether to rhyme. My experience has been that these decisions about form tend to get made, not autonomously, but as the impulse for the poem—the poem's "subject"—is coming to the surface. Form and subject, in the case of a given poem, are not independent of one another in my experience. I don't, for example, decide to write a sonnet and then come up with an appropriate subject. For me, the first step toward a poem will usually be a tentative line or two, which will stimulate further

reflection concerning whatever the subject might be and which will also suggest the form the poem might take. There is often then an experimentation stage, which leads (for better or worse) to the choosing of a form and in which the poem's subject takes on a more definite shape.

I should say also that the sound of a poem is very important to me. I would group myself among those poets for whom much of a poem's beauty is its sound, and I myself would be tempted to substitute "most" for "much." Robert Frost spoke of the musical possibilities that result from natural speech rhythms being stretched across strict meter. Fulfilling these possibilities is something I try to do in the writing of a poem, which I suppose is another category of aesthetic decision—a type of decision that potentially must be made in the composition of each line. I've had the experience, reported by any number of poets, of hearing a certain cadence for a line of a poem before the words themselves occur to me.

*JW: Having been a lawyer for thirty three years, your position and vocation make you something of an anomaly among contemporary poets, who often pursue careers in the academy. How did the legal system and your experience of government shape your sense of poetry? I'm thinking particularly of the melancholy of "Lawyer Story: The Settlement, 2001" and the wry criticism that informs "Lawyer Story: The Charity Benefit Dinner, 2005."*

*CH: I think I would say that working as a lawyer did not so much shape my sense of poetry as increase my susceptibility to it. I haven't written many poems stemming from my legal career, although (as you say) I worked as a lawyer for a long time; the two poems you mention, along with a handful of others not in *Cave Art*, are, I think, the only exceptions.*

As a lawyer, you tend to see up close a good deal of how the world works—of how the world’s sausage gets made, so to speak—and you become an active participant. In my case, since I was primarily a business lawyer, this meant lots of contracts, negotiations, and buying and selling. And as with many professions, legal work can be pretty consuming. Anyway, over the years, I became increasingly aware that my life and work as a lawyer were not affording me much experience of the beauty of the world and that I was hungry for that experience. I’m very grateful for my legal career in many ways, not least because I think it ultimately cracked me open to other things.

**JW:** *In his essay Dante (1921), T.S. Eliot makes the following assertion:*

*“Dante, more than any other poet has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy, not as a theory (in the modern and not the Greek sense of that word) or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something perceived.”*

*How do you engage with poetry as a work of perception? Of philosophical rumination?*

**CH:** How we see is a vast and urgent question, to my mind. And—as writers like Coleridge and Owen Barfield have pointed out—how we see the world outside ourselves is dependent on the imagination. If the imagination dims, so will the world, along with its meaning and the quality of human life in it. I agree with those who attribute much of human moral failure to failures of the imagination.

So poetry and art in general are enormously important. Richard Wilbur has a lovely early poem called “My Father Paints the Summer.” The poem’s setting is a resort hotel on a chilly, rainy day in July, when the hotel guests are reduced to playing ping pong indoors. But upstairs, in his room, the poet’s father

is painting a summer scene, and his painting brings the warm breezes, brightness, and color of summer to life. The essence—the deep reality—of summer, according to the poem, “is always an imagined time.”

The world is full of meaning, I would affirm. But I would also say that that meaning is often hidden beneath a surface of chaos. One of the wonderful things about art (including poetry) is that it can occasionally glimpse and embody a small part of that meaning, thus making it more visible.

*JW: As a poet, do you situate yourself within a larger tradition? Do your interests/ambitions mirror your peers? What is the philosophy that informs a collection like Cave Art? I am increasingly troubled by how self-focused, how omnipresent the “I” appears to be in much of the poetry being written today. Cave Art is after something else. Your work is intensely interested in the lives of other people and the rhythms of their humanity.*

**CH:** As someone who self-identifies as a Christian, I hope and trust that God—God who is love—is somehow at the center of things. And yet, anyone who is paying attention can’t very well escape the fact that we human beings are often overmatched by life; that the world’s suffering, violence, and sorrow, in all of their infinite variety, sometimes seem—sometimes are in fact—too much to bear. And being present to this situation is simply one of the things that poetry can do. I think I like those poems best that speak from inside the sickroom, rather than from outside or above it. There is, I think, a lot of wisdom and even love in those lines of Auden’s great elegy for Yeats that remind poetry of its duties, including its duty to: “Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress[.]”

**JW:** *Cave Art makes ample use of the eulogy / elegy. How are these forms useful to you as an artist? So many of these poems (at least eight) are dedications and/or tributes to particular individuals.*

**CH:** There's an obvious tension in human life, arising (I suppose) from the transitory world, between wanting to cling to a known past, on the one hand, and wanting to move on into an unknown but exciting future, on the other. I think it's a tension most people feel, and certainly it's been the impulse for a good deal of poetry. I'm thinking, for example, of Robert Frost's poem "Reluctance," which suggests that it may be a kind of "treason / To go with the drift of things . . . / And bow and accept the end / Of love or a season[.]"

Our dominant culture, I think it's safe to say, is definitely on the side of going with the drift of things, of moving on. Nowadays, grief itself seems increasingly to be viewed as a disorder that can and should be dealt with clinically. But this seems inhuman to me (not, of course, that there can't be inordinate grief in particular cases). It seems to me that there is a deep-seated human need to remember and be grateful for people, places, and experiences we have known and perhaps loved and, when they are lost, to pause a while to grieve and to give articulate expression to that grief.

Poems can help with this. Reading a poem requires me to slow down; it takes my full attention; I may need or want to read the poem through several times and then take further time for reflection. Poetry, because of what it is, creates space for resistance to the cultural imperative always to be moving on without looking back. And this resistance, I would argue, is important to the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the created world and of ourselves as human creatures—creatures whose lives may, as Christian hope affirms, have eternal significance, but which (if we take the Incarnation seriously) have meaning here and now as well.

**JW:** *What is the relationship between theology and poetry? How do your theological convictions manifest themselves in the poetry you write?*

**CH:** The relationship between theology and poetry is something I think about a lot. However, it's a very mysterious subject to me, and I don't feel at all competent to say much about it. Theology and poetry strike me as separate spheres of activity, distinct from one another, each having its own proper concerns. Poetry, as one of the arts, is (I would say) primarily concerned with making, whereas theology's primary concerns are obviously much different. Not, of course, that I think theology and poetry can't sometimes take an interest in each other.

As far as my own practice is concerned, I try, for the most part, not to use much traditional Christian vocabulary in the poems I write—mostly for fear of relying too heavily on the accumulated understandings and emotions that by now are inextricably attached to these words. My thought, in general, has been to try to write poems that tacitly assume the truth of the Incarnation and that also convey, in some definite and particular way, what it's like to see and experience the reality of a world twisted by injustice and suffering, but in which—surprisingly, in a sense, but not coincidentally—beauty and love are also present.

I should perhaps add that my practice may be changing somewhat. Several of the recent poems I've written (subsequent to the poems in *Cave Art*) grapple a little more explicitly with the experience and challenges of Christian life and faith.

**JW:** *One thing I admire about Cave Art is its willingness to acknowledge the limits of control. These are sober poems that dismiss callow idealism: technology is fallible (“Bumpy Air”), saints die (“Easter Spoils, 2012”) and nature resists the sentimental (“Poisoned”). Do you see your work inhabiting a*

*prophetic function? This is a loaded term, but I mean it in the sense of saying what must be said, even when it is not popular or advantageous.*

**CH:** I do think the acknowledgment of limits is hugely important. We human beings are finite creatures after all and fallen ones at that—or so I say, at least, and so Christianity traditionally has taught. I said earlier that my poems tend to assume the truth of the Incarnation, and I think our creaturely status is implicit in this assumption. To forget that we are creatures and subject to necessary limits is, to my mind, to court the gravest kinds of consequences—only think, for example, of the human race’s incessant wars and our unrelenting degradation of the natural environment. Having said this, however, I should probably also say that my poems tend to grow out of concrete circumstances and aren’t meant primarily as arguments for abstract principles, even one as important as the need to acknowledge limits. I don’t think of my poems as prophetic—although I have to say I was glad to come across this sentence in Glyn Maxwell’s recent book *On Poetry*: “Any form in poetry, be it meter, rhyme, line-break, is a metaphor for creaturely life.”

**JW:** *What does poetry provide for you as a writer? What has poetry taught you?*

**CH:** Poetry teaches attentiveness (among other things), and I’m learning to value attentiveness more and more. Whether I’m learning the thing itself I’m not so sure.

As to what poetry provides, I’ll give a fairly personal answer. I am a relative latecomer to poetry. I did not begin devoting serious time and effort to writing poems until my mid-fifties. Under the circumstances, I have experienced poetry as an enormous and

unlooked-for gift. I keep this small poem of George Herbert's on my desk:

### The Quidditie

My God, a verse is not a crown,  
No point of honour, or gay suit,  
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,  
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;  
It never was in France or Spain;  
Nor can it entertain the day  
With my great stable or demain:

It is no office, art, or news,  
Nor the Exchange, or busy Hall;  
But it is that which while I use  
I am with thee, and *most take all*.