

## Writing from the “Heart of the Empire”: Ron Slate on Incentive, History, and Politics in Poetry

The following is an interview with poet, Ron Slate – author of the prize-winning collection of poetry *The Incentive of the Maggot* – conducted recently via e-mail. More extensive author bio information is featured immediately after the conclusion of the interview.



**Edward Carvalho:** When you and I first met at the Thomas Crane public library reading to celebrate National Poetry Month in 2005, I remember telling you how I admired the title of your book. For me, you use the maggot as a symbol of the seemingly innocuous – the easily-overlooked – which affects our relationships and society. Often times, these are the things that determine our fate, but do so uninhibited by the constraints of motives typically associated with ethical considerations. Therein is the riddle, I think. This idea of the maggot having an agenda is a uniquely human attempt at honeycombing the mechanics of our existence.

I see the maggot materialize in a variety of forms in the context of the work: as the bombs falling over Germany from your father’s B-17 in “Small Talk in Munich,” the loss of innocence and gain of experience, through the petty thefts of the “small objects, all objects vanishing” in “Light Fingers.” The maggots appear as ‘leaves laying in the driveway’ in “Shame.” Can you talk a bit more about your own incentives for the use of the maggot in the poetry?

**Ron Slate:** The title poem was the next to last piece written for the book, near the end of 2003, so the image of the maggot was hardly central to the making of the book. The last poem completed was “Monuments,” and both poems were intended to draw together the main preoccupations of the book for the final section. I had been working with Louise Glück during that year, and we had pulled 20 of the original 33 poems out of the manuscript. *The Incentive of the Maggot* is the residue of my discovery of how and what to write. Remember that I hadn’t written poetry for 20 years. It was like discovering a long-lost relative who had aged remarkably well. The maggot is a sort of recycler of life – he is transformed – taken to the next stage – by encountering and making use of loss. If our politicians like us to think of history as dispiritingly linear, the maggot tells us that we may be renewed by what is cyclical and repeating, like memory, like our psychic archetypes. For the maggot, the incentive is a way to keep living. It’s about the same for me.

**EC:** I’d like to talk about this idea of ‘discovery of how and what to write’ as it relates to your period of quiet hiatus. Recently, I read in *Poets and Writers* that Franz Wright didn’t write a poem for two years. Shortly after coming back to writing, he went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. In your case, you also were rewarded for your taking a step back, first with the Bakeless Prize in 2004 and then with the recent nomination from the National Book Circle Critics prize in poetry.

There is the old caution in poetry, as with any other art, that what may start out as a “beautiful woman ends up horribly as a black fish,”: do you believe poets need to periodically break from

themselves and go through this type of *ars poetica* in order to reengage with the mechanics of how to apply their voice to a new set of circumstances?

**RS:** When we talk about the sources of writing, we say they're mysterious. But when we talk about the sources of not-writing, we often say they're pathological. In fact, the sources of inactivity are also mysterious. It may happen that you are aswarm with poetry for ten years, say during your twenties. Your awareness of how much depends on your own mind places a huge burden on you. You may experience a rift between your imagination and your life, and that discrepancy may be unbearable. You may feel threatened by the encroachments and blandishments of the interior life. This situation may drive you into the world, and perhaps away from the repellent careerism of literature. I'm describing what happened to me. This situation seems much different from the more benign periods of unproductivity you query. But regardless of the length or depth of one's silences, you still must decide – that is, if the impulse to write remains – if you're going to be a poet who'll wait until you have something critical to say. The silences have a way of reminding you that a poem needs to sound necessary, to have the deliberateness and dynamics of a rescue.

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How many poems achieve this? Not many. The silences, confronting you with stolid reality, suggest the obverse of that world, the one thing that all poets in all ages have in common – Octavio Paz pointed this out – “the perception of the other side of reality.” Poets have always been the ones to admit to chaos – personally, politically, in all ways – and to position poetic form as a way to create worlds out of chaos. Our silences, seemingly so threatening to our progress as writers, are chaotic in that regard. And so, they may be necessary, and this may be why we must act in complicity with them by waiting for what's necessary.

**EC:** This almost begs the question of what is truly necessary for you as a poet, such as, what are the kinds of things that motivate you to write? And, tangentially, does your motivation ever focus on a particular poet or type of poetry? If so, who are some of the people you regard as influencing your voice?

**RS:** I was going to say that I can tell you what motivates me to mow my lawn, but I can't or won't say what motivates me to write. But I'm not sure about my lawn either. What I do know is that Wallace Stevens said, “Words are everything else in the world.” Why write? To give shape to the shapeless, which is the inner life. What motivates me to do this? – a thrilling submission, and a shameless ambition, simultaneously. The words or phrases I hear before writing sound like lyric blurtings or questions, not plot-lines or thematic concepts or descriptions – so, lyric poetry is what preoccupies me. I enjoy poems of tension and argument. Poems with dramatic situations – not narrative poems, but lyric poems with a point of view, sustained tone, vocal singularity. So many of Stevens' poems, for instance, for all their celebration of imagination and sound, are quite contentious. Why not? He spent all day cutting the most profitable and safest deals possible for his employer and at night he cut the most rewarding and ambitious deals for himself. My influences are familial – phrasing intended to cajole and comfort, frantic outbursts of dread and outbreaks of laughter, bluntness and withheld emotion. A pride in getting to the point, and in making a point – the disavowals and assertions.

**EC:** Are you currently working on a follow-up to *The Incentive of the Maggot*? If so, do you find that your subject matter has undergone any unanticipated metamorphosis – transmogrified in any way? What are some of the topics you are exploring in your post-*Maggot* work?

**RS:** It seems that all I can do is address what presents itself to me. But at the same time, I'm not interested in "subjects" per se – if that means merely describing something already comprehended, located, perceived – making illuminating comments. I've got a craven tendency to want to please, wrap things up neatly. Nothing the matter with pleasing and concluding – it's the craving that's suspicious. If one experiences the daily rounds of the interior life as voracious, repetitious, and tiresome, one's first impulse as a writer may be to fix on the world's phenomena. But since aesthetic experience is always private, in the end one must turn back. The transit, back and forth, seems to be a recurring gesture. Some poets have more courage than I – and a talent for creating a book of poems that drills down into a critical condition – everything is at stake because of that focus and drilling. Read Louise Glück's *Averno* and *The Seven Ages*. I take heart from her work – and also

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from George Seferis, who worked as a Greek diplomat within the sweep and crushing results of the last century's politics and war. My temperament won't let me settle anywhere – this disturbs me sometimes, but then occasionally the transit assumes a form and voice. As for subject matter and

topics, we tend to confuse subject matter with content – and to identify poets mainly with their subjects, not contents. Content is what we find in the subject matter. Everything I'm working on now is unanticipated. It's been that way since I resumed writing poetry in 2001. It's all experimental. I seem to have some unfinished business with the feminine. Other than that, I'm all over the place.

**EC:** Do you feel an urgency to make a statement about the current political climate? What do you think is the most imaginative expression for such a statement?

**RS:** What I feel are the enticements and revulsions of history and I'm conscious of the fact that I'm writing from the heart of the empire. For guidance on the role of the poet during turbulent times, I look to Stevens, Seferis, Paz, and Brodsky. Each of them wrote tellingly about this topic. They all seem to converge on one point: The poet will necessarily reflect his or her times. Some of the poems in *The Incentive of the Maggot* address the power of the political over our daily consciousness, like “The Final Call.” Recently, I was told by an acquaintance who works at the NSA that my poem “End of the Peacock Throne” was translated into Farsi and is being circulated in Iran. The speaker of the poem, in a sort of history-induced trance, says those in power always injure the innocent: Cyrus and Darius; the Shah and the Ayatollah; Alexander and American senators. So yes, political material does attract me. But as for the ‘current’ situation, I find most of the poetry in the *Poets Against the War* anthology to be inert, banal, uninteresting. Maybe that's because when you bring fully cooked ideas to the writing of poetry – political, philosophical, or otherwise – there's nothing new for the writer to discover in the process of writing. The poem becomes a manikin for costumes previously designed. Adam Zagajewski says in one of his essays in *Ardor* that lyric poetry has two chief concerns: it provides forms for our inner lives, and it watches out for history since we can't

rely only on our private experience. Brodsky says the same thing: “The word ‘history’ is equally applicable to the endeavors of nations and to private lives. In both cases it consists of memory, record, and interpretation.” And Octavio Paz said, “To fight evil is to fight ourselves. And that is the meaning of history.” All of these views give us confidence to speak out in the context of a larger, disturbing world, while struggling for the survival of our individual voices.

**EC:** Naturally, as it relates to “End of the Peacock Throne,” I feel compelled to ask you about a poet’s responsibilities: are there any? And to whom are they addressed?

I was privy to your detailed explanation of the back-story to this poem, a “very complex poem” as you described it– and certainly, your commentary helped to open more doors of meaning when I went back to read it shortly thereafter. I think it is reasonable to put forth that the nature of the translation into Farsi and the subsequent dissemination in Iran is likely motivated by an interest in the poem as a historical / cultural record of an Iran of the distant past, the not-so distant past (e.g., the era of the Shah, Khomeini, etc.) and its relationship to the present rather than for ideological purposes of the future. But what would you think of the poem being utilized for political revolt in Iran or more broadly as radical polemic in certain corners of the Islamic World?

**RS:** Regarding the responsibilities of the poet, I can’t improve on what Robert Pinsky offers on the subject. One key phrase I can paraphrase goes something like, “a poet must feel a need to answer and make a promise to respond.” He says those needs are more critical than the poet’s need for an audience. Since 1800 or so, here in the West, our culture has been insisting that what we create be “useful,” have utility. Why do we ask if a poet or a poem has responsibilities? Because in one sense, poetry shirks the responsibility to be productive. What Robert has done in his essays is to connect the poet’s act with civic-mindedness, and in turn, to connect that civic mind to announcing not the news, but what has been forgotten. Octavio Paz said that poetry exists prior to religion and philosophies. I’d add politics. The sense of that should stiffen the spine of any poet. Poets will also talk about their responsibility to the language, to refresh it through one’s discoveries and experiments. In the end, poetry is a mythic force, fickle and proud, selfish and irrepressible, evasive and sexy – and probably mainly responsible to itself. But Robert has led the way for those of us who like the acoustics of the town hall and want to be introduced to the mayor’s wife.

“End of the Peacock Throne” casts a stone at all politicians, senators and ayatollahs alike, so I’m not sure how it would be used as a polemic. I’ve heard from several Iranian-Americans who like the poem’s plangent tone of exile, and since the poem circles around the figure of the late Shah’s late daughter, I don’t believe it has much polemical value in Iran. A journalist recently said that Islamic literature has lost its sense of irony, a quality that has been present in the past, in the philosophy of Averöoes, in Persian poetry, and in the 1001 Tales. Perhaps that’s what the poem offers, a view that says: history and politics depreciate our lives. My poem incorporates bits of traditional Persian poetry that say as much. The Shah's daughter died in Paris of a drug overdose in 2001 – a sad girl, displaced and grieving, a spoiled princess maybe, a tyrant’s daughter, but a girl destroyed nonetheless.

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**Bios:**

**Ron Slate** lives in Milton, Massachusetts and is currently the chief operating officer of a biotech start-up. Previously, he spent more than 20 years in corporate communications for high-tech companies. He earned a Masters degree in creative writing from Stanford in 1973 and completed coursework towards a doctorate in American literature at the University of Wisconsin. From 1973-1988 he edited the poetry magazine *The Chowder Review*. His poetry was published in the late 70's and early 80's in magazines like *Antaeus*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*, but he virtually stopped writing for 20 years. In 2001, he started writing poetry again. The result was *The Incentive of the Maggot* which won the Bakeless Prize of the Bread Loaf Conference (selected by Robert Pinsky) and was published by Houghton Mifflin in 2005. Subsequently the book was nominated for best book of poetry of 2005 by both the National Book Critics Circle and the Academy of American Poets (for the Lenore Marshall Prize), and won the Larry Levis Prize of Virginia Commonwealth University for the best first or second book of poetry.

**Edward Carvalho** is a twice-nominated Pushcart Prize poet (2004-2005) and author of *solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short*, a collection of contemporary poetry forthcoming from Fine Tooth Press. His poems – once described as 'original, innovative, imaginative and brutal' – have appeared along with his essays, reviews and critical papers in numerous journals around the country.

He holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from Goddard College (2006) and is currently researching the poetry of Walt Whitman while enrolled as a doctoral student in the Literature and Criticism program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is also the recent recipient of that university's Twentieth Annual IUP Doctoral Fellowship and employed there as editorial assistant for the *Works and Days* journal.

A native of Connecticut, he now shares dual residence in Indiana, Pennsylvania and Boston, Massachusetts.