

IT RAINS, YOU SEE

Reader, I do not want to complicate the world
but mathematics is tragic, there is pathos in
numbers;
it's all over, boys—space is curved,
you are hungry and your hunger multiplies
by hundreds.

in your first shuddering temple of chalk
in the slate days you taught numbers
to juve under the complex chewing pencils;
you talked
darkly of the multiplying world, and your
fingers

hunted for braille like urgent forms.
you go outside and now it rains,
and the rain is teaching itself its own name;
it rains, you see, but Hell comes down cunei-
form.

—from A Breakfast for Barbarians

way to function. I've never come to terms with movement in time. Anyway, that's my problem.

THOMPSON: What about moving in society? Do you feel the need to bring yourself to a mass audience with the sort of interaction that Leonard Cohen seems to be getting now?

MacEWEN: I'd like more of it; I don't strive for it. I think someone like Leonard is much more able to move freely among people and give more of himself as an artist and as a person than I am at this point—probably he's a much more relaxed person as well, in a very broad sense.

MANDEL: LSD did that to him, I guess.

MacEWEN: Did it? I haven't gotten involved in that sort of thing.

THOMPSON: When you look around you, what do you see that you want to turn into poems?

MacEWEN: Well, so far, it's not the immediate environment. I've never really come to terms with making poems out of automobiles and trains and IBMs. Other people have, you know, and I might eventually, but not so far. I'm not seeing all of this yet. I'm sort of shrugging it off—you know, "I'll deal with that later." I don't see it as any more or less significant than any other environment that exists.

MANDEL: Let's ask a question about technique here. Is there anything that you're trying to do particularly in poetry right now?

MacEWEN: In terms of form? No, nothing in particular right now. I'm just letting that take care of itself for the present, because I'm too tied up in what I'm saying right now and I don't feel I can also tackle a very complex problem of how precisely it should be said. It's getting a bit smoother than it was. I know on the days of *The Drunken Clock* I had no regard at all for technique and it ended up very jerky, strange rhythms that aren't really very pleasing. The only thing that's happened is it's gotten a little more fluid, but I'm not consciously thinking of it. But I am in this novel, oddly enough. All my real attention, my methodical care, goes into the prose. It doesn't go into the poetry.

MANDEL: A number of our poets have turned to forms other than the metaphysical lyric, which was pretty well the dominant form. They're going into the novel, the film; they get guitars and they sing their songs. Do you think there's any reason for this? You're doing the same thing.

MacEWEN: By turning to novels . . . ?

MANDEL: Does this represent something different than working in poetry, or what?

MacEWEN: I've never been able to see a real change of attitude when I go from a poem to prose. The only thing is that I spend a certain amount of time each day on the novel. Then if I feel like it I write a poem, but that's more of a luxury, more of a fun thing . . .

HARDY: What about the new novel?

MacEWEN: It's fairly long, written in a straightforward way, taking the life of the pharaoh Amenhotep IV from the beginning to the end.



—David Applewhite photo

. . . COSMOPHAGY FOR BARBARIANS

HARDY: Is he a historical figure, or did you create him?

MacEWEN: Oh no, he's very real. He's far too real because I had to do so much research on him. He's the husband of Nefertiti, if you know that name. He was a monotheist, and a heretic; he made a lot of trouble while he was on the throne, abandoned the old capital and so on—quite an interesting figure. There's quite a lot of material on him.

HARDY: Why did you fasten on him?

MacEWEN: I always wanted to write a historical novel in the first place . . . and I always wanted to do something about him in the second place. I've been reading everything I could about him for years and years.

THOMPSON: Would it be fair to say that you're fascinated by the hero figure as such?

MacEWEN: Only the ambiguous hero; I'm not interested in the hero, I'm interested in the double hero-criminal type, I guess Thomas Mann's *The Holy Sinner* is the best way to describe the type I mean.

MANDEL: Or Saint Genet?

MacEWEN: This type of thing, yes; the man that's neither a criminal nor a god or . . . I guess in a way it is an extension of the Christ/Magician thing too, the black and white aspects . . .

HARDY: . . . The criminal saint . . .

MacEWEN: This fascinates me. I don't know what it is that makes a criminal and how thin is the line between the destroyer and the creator. The line is so thin . . .

HARDY: Sartre says that Genet believes that every poem is an act of murder.

MacEWEN: There must be something in that, because all the poets I've met are awfully guilty people. I don't know what it is, but I've never met a poet yet who hasn't had some weird sort of probably self-imposed or invented terror. . . . And the guilt may stem from feeling always that by creating art you're cheating life . . . By trying to create a kind of secondary reality I feel I'm sort of insulting reality in some way. I've never quite figured it out.

THOMPSON: Do you think poetry has to be a violent art?

MacEWEN: Do I think it has to be a violent art . . . ?

THOMPSON: I think most of your poems are fairly violent.

MANDEL: You're speaking to two elegant poets, John Thompson and Jon Whyte. . .

MacEWEN (ignoring him; loudly): Do I write VIOLENT POEMS?

MANDEL: Oh I think your poems are beautifully violent. That's why I like them so much.

MacEWEN: They're violent!!!

EVERYONE: Yeah, yeah.

MacEWEN: I've never heard that adjective used . . . I like it, I like it. I'll buy that. Yes. Oh, I like that. Yes. Well, since everybody's agreed that they're violent, I guess I'd better say that I think poetry should be a violent art. (*Gales of laughter.*) What else can I say?

THOMPSON: Most other poets who talk about eating are talking about being eaten up; eating is something cruel and destructive. Whereas the appetites in your poems are very much accepted, very much gloried in.

MacEWEN: It pleases me that you feel that way, because that's the way I wanted the poems to read. You know, Eli, don't you find that most modern poetry is awfully paranoiac?

MANDEL: Oh yes, and I get madder every day.

MacEWEN: And this is what I want to get away from, altogether—this idea that we are being blasted by this and crushed by this and inhibited by that. That's why I'm so glad you made the remark the feast thing in the *Breakfast* book is not that we are being eaten but that we are doing the eating.

MANDEL: It's a revel; there's a lot of joy in that book.

THOMPSON: You'd like to write joyful poetry?

MacEWEN: Oh yes, oh yes, definitely, I'm tired of the paranoiac world that we live in and the gloom which has descended over youth living in this generation, in this part of the country. Youth isn't youth anymore. I meet very few young people.

HARDY: Does one find release from gloom by letting the appetite go?

MacEWEN: Well in some ways. We still have to stay within reason, we're civilized North Americans . . . I'm not suggesting endless Saturnalia . . .

MANDEL: You're not nearly barbaric enough. I'm all for an endless Saturnalia. . . . We're at the university now, by the way.