

**Hilda Bernstein**

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**From:** Sarah <sarah@hi32.demon.co.uk>  
**To:** Hilda Bernstein <hilda@bernstein57.freerve.co.uk>  
**Sent:** 26 November 2000 03:34 PM  
**Subject:** News wanted from Bilbao

PS I write this at the beginning because it is rather a long ee and you'll have other things to do on arriving home! Sorreee.

Your Husband in the Armed Forces feels a resigned and sad poem. There's a strong feeling of bearing things and waiting and the endless uninterrupted unstartling daily routine far away from useless war. I enjoyed it.

Browning is one of my dad's favourite poets and he would read poetry or rather quote poetry to us children all through our childhood. He still quotes it all the time. There's a lot of good in him, you know. My Last Duchess was one such poem that got read. I haven't really studied Browning though for myself - I just rather know from hearsay what a fine poet he was.

Rilke interests me. After reading his letters to a young poet - I was put onto this by reading a biography of the american poet, Anne Sexton, who apparently swore by it - I got hold of a book of his poems. The few I have dipped into I like very much. The edition I have has the poem in german on the left and the poem in english on the right so you can see the shapes of the words and the feel of the sounds in their original. My copy doesn't have the poem Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes. If I remember correctly, Hermes, who was a bit of prankster as a child, found Eurydice for Orpheus, who fell passionately in love with her - and they became man and wife, I think. Unfortunately, Eurydice was bitten by a poisonous snake and was whisked away into the underworld by Pluto. Orpheus was devastated and pleaded to be allowed into the underworld to fetch Eurydice. Whatever god it was, Pluto, or Hermes, or whoever, agreed on the one condition that he did not at any stage while collecting her and leading her out of the underworld look at her until they were out. As he is leading E out she pleads and pleads with O to look at her accusing him no doubt of not loving her, etc. etc. - you can imagine the dialogue. Finally in exasperation O turns just before they are out of the underworld and looks at her only to see her disappearing fast back into the underworld. As you can imagine O was even more devastated and when he came back into the big wide world he played and wept endless mournful songs with his lute. The local women were so enraged that this very eligible man wasn't choosing one of them to replace E went on a frenzied rampage and tore him to bits and I think fed him to the dogs. Not sure about the dogs bit.

Of course our exchanges are revealing. Like a character in a good novel - where speech and actions reveal their personality. Whether I was born with a cross rebellious spirit or whether the bullying from my elder brother or the autocratic nature of my father drove me to question and feel out of sync with society, I don't know. Perhaps a bit of both. I think I felt instinctively that more was expected of my brothers and that far as I was concerned, as long as I was a good girl, it didn't matter. I was not considered bright, I was given no confidence in any thing and if I did do anything well, it was received with amazement. Then I suppose all sorts of serendipitous circumstances put me in touch with other systems and I began to empathise with the dispossessed of the world. Art - I realised I loved it at about 16 or 17. Music and theatre had been important to me - and it was

for playing the violin that I received high praise which puzzled and astonished me - one time from an famous examiner who wanted me to join his youth orchestra, I was 11 or 12 at the time, and from a wonderful violin teacher I had for a couple of years who thought I was very talented. She unfortunately got a severe case of glandular fever. My first violin teacher hit me a lot of the time or was that the one after my favourite one. Anyway the one after quickly killed any aspirations I might have started to build inside my unconfident self. I had always won prizes for art but had no understanding of what being an artists might be. I did want to go on finishing A levels but my father wasn't keen and said that if I did a secretarial course and then afterwards still felt like going to art college then we would see. I did still feel like going to art college - by this time I was anorexic and acutely depressed - but there was no money for me to go what with my middle brother at Oxford University and my elder brother gambling away money that dad was forced to cough up. It was at that stage I realised that I had to go my own way and establish myself. I pretty much cut off from the family for other reasons as well and went my own way. I didn't think I would ever get to college but then a series of events made it possible and when I was 28, divorced and pretty depressed, I went. The best thing I ever did.

How was Bilbao? Lots of love, Sarah

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**Hilda**

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**From:** "Sarah Cawkwell" <sarah.cawkwell@btinternet.com>  
**To:** "Hilda" <hildabe@mweb.co.za>  
**Sent:** 17 July 2004 12:32 PM  
**Subject:** I've been back in poetry

Dear Hilda,

I have been reading a most entrancing biography of the peasant poet, John Clare. I've never been very aware of his poems but after reading a very ecstatic review of this biography, I couldn't resist. So that led me to his poems. So much to entrance. And it is so fascinating to read about his struggles as an 'artist' many of which sound so familiar. I am sure you know his work but I'll just send you these two poems and a couple of snippets - as I do think about you when reading poetry. Hope you don't think it is too much of a mouthful to send in one go.

1

How beautiful e'en seems  
 This simple twig that steals it from the hedge  
 And wavering dips down to taste the stream.  
 I cannot think it how the reason is  
 That every trifle nature's bosom wears  
 Should seem so lovely and appear so sweet  
 And charm so much my soul while heedless passenger  
 Soodles me by, an animated post,  
 And ne'er so much as turns his head to look  
 But stalks along as though his eyes were blinded  
 And as if the witching face of nature  
 Held but now a dark unmeaning blank.

2

The small wind whispers through the leafless hedge  
 Most sharp and chill, where the light snowy flakes  
 Rest on each twig and spike of wither'd sedge,  
 Resembling scatter'd feathers; - vainly breaks  
 The pale split sunbeam through the frowning cloud,  
 On Winter's frowns below - from day to day  
 Unmelted still he spreads his hoary shroud,  
 In dithering pride on the pale traveller's way,  
 Who, croodling, hastens from the storm behind  
 Fast gathering deep and black, again to find  
 His cottage-fire and corner's sheltering bounds;  
 Where, haply, such uncomfortable days  
 Make musical the wood-sap's frizzling sounds,  
 And hoarse loud bellows puffing up the blaze.

And how about these lines on much loved traditions:

Old customs! Oh! I love the sound,  
 However simple they may be:  
 Whate'er with time hath sanction found,  
 Is welcome, and is dear to me.

Or this too, on oral tradition:

The whole of music which his village knows  
 Which wild remembrance in each little town  
 From mouth to mouth through ages handles down.

And much more besides. It has also made me look up about the period of 'enclosures' which obviously had an enormous impact on the rural poor. I'm still reading the book - unfortunately the hurly burly of London is not very responsive somehow. I wish we had spent longer in Cornwall which was very isolated and quiet. I am also reading a lovely book on language by the linguist Trask who has just died. Very rich in thought and understanding. I have your new introduction nearby to start on when I've finished these. All pleasures.

The weather here is abominable. You say it is cold with you. Well it is cold here too and endlessly raining - and we have had the heating on a lot of June and all July so far. Goodness knows if it is going to change. I do hope so. And I've really abandoned the garden this year because (a) I've had too much to do so no energy and (b) it rains most Saturdays which is

my usual gardening day.

I don't think you told me about the Luthuli Silver award. Very nice too. Congratulations. What was it for? I'm sure it is not a good idea to look closely, though, at a house that holds many memories for you. They will always be destroyed by newcomers.

I am very pleased to hear you are still writing, dipping into the computer, putting down what you call 'rambling' writings. I am sure it will be of immense interest to your children, grandchildren, great grandchildren .... and great, great etc. There are moments in one's life when one is interested in one's inheritance.

Things are still hectic here. I seem to find it very difficult to find peace and calm. In the end I blame the weather which has been just drear and dreadful. Better than blaming my inability to prioritise. Next week I plunge into hanging the exhibition at LCF, etc. I hope it goes all right - and by that I hope I manage to sell something. I've really over extended this year - all on good things which will repay in the future, I hope, but it does make me nervous - and is giving me sleepless nights. Consequently I feel deeply tired. And the political scene, as ever, depresses. I have been a bit whiney over these last few months - so I've decided in August to go pretty much into purdah. I can't go completely because my flat is empty and I am having major works done there for reletting in September. That takes time, thought and courage. Oi. Forgive me being so sorrowful for myself!

Much love, Sarah

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