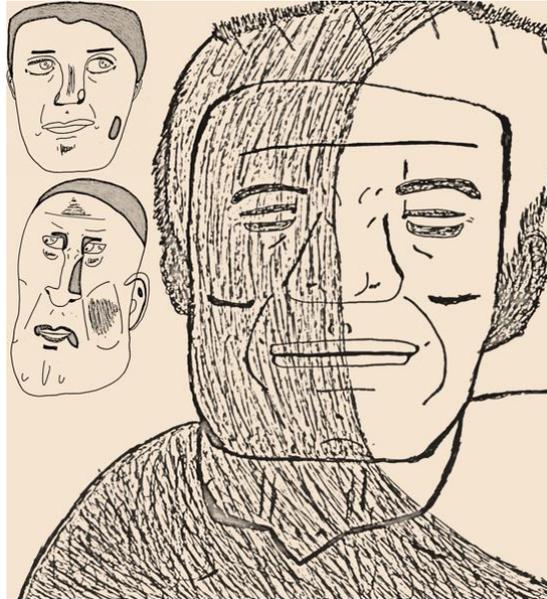


Domesticating the Poem:  
An Interview with Professor Peter Hoheisel  
By Christopher Winn



*The Poet Enlightened: A Portrait of Peter Hoheisel by Christopher Winn*



*Interviewer (L) & Interviewee (R)*

Peter Hoheisel, the son of German immigrants, grew up in an idyllic 1950's Detroit. After Catholic school he studied at Saint Paul's College in Washington, D.C. with the intent of becoming a priest. That is until, when asked who he would like to be if anything were possible, he wrote down an answer somewhat different from the typical seminarian. He confessed he would like to be a wandering poet, though he had done little wandering or poetry up to that point. Completing his graduate degree but passing on ordination, he worked in public relations, went back to school to study literature, and became a salesman on behalf of Panama's Cuna Indians, marketing their traditional fabric art. A decade and-a-half later, having earned multiple grants from the Michigan Counsel for Arts to write and teach poetry, his self-authoring had come true.

In the '90s he released his debut book of poetry, *North To Superior*, and moved across the country to Texas in pursuit of a museum residency and lecturer position. In 1993 he became chair of Religion and Philosophy at Lon Morris College in Jacksonville, Texas, and decided to put down roots. I met him at Jacksonville's public library in the autumn of 2017, where he was hosting a poetry "open mic" event. Little did I know that I'd be working for him a few months later, when—while recounting my sudden state of unemployment—he unexpectedly offered me the opportunity to be the editor of, and de facto agent for, several of his manuscripts. Thus, in autumn of 2018, we sat down at his lakeside home in Jacksonville to muse upon his life's work and the "big picture" of poetry while his new books impend.

**CW:** Professor, the cultures of many nations have a poetic origin—Homeric in Greco-Rome, Davidian in Israel, Arthurian in Britain. What does it say about the United States that we lack this poetic origin?

**PH:** It's a blessing. Because the founders of this country definitely did not want any baggage preventing them from creating a new type of country. For example, the United States is founded upon an idea, several ideas, but it's the only nation in the whole world that I know of that is an intellectual construct, and they had enough experience of the religious wars in Europe and just the—so, what I'm saying is that we don't have any mythology, and that's wonderful! Fine if we create one, but all of those myths and legends and poems actually—all are connected with a sense of tribalism, and tribalism is something the United States, up until the present moment at least, when certain people apparently want us to descend into tribalism—tribalism has generally, they saw it as causing a lot of problems and they wanted to create a new nation based on ideas. The idea, centrally, of objective law, limited government, and individual rights and responsibilities. Again, a sign of increasing tribalism in the United States is when you hear people talking as if there's such a thing as group rights or group *anything*. The human being—and poets should know this—the human being if anything is a total individual. Every one of us is *so* different from the other. That's why the concept of equality also has been screwed up recently. We're not equal in anything except our humanity, and, based on the Jewish-Christian tradition, our spirituality, our equality before God. But, I like the fact that the U.S. is an intellectual construct based on [avoiding] the bad things that the founders saw occurring in Europe.

**CW:** Have you ever witnessed a pronouncedly positive or negative reaction when telling a stranger that you are a poet, and would you share the story if so?

**PH:** [Smiling]. No, it's as baffling to people as when you say, "I teach philosophy." Absolute silence, nobody knows—we're not a philosophical nor a poetic culture, so people just say "Oh, ok," even if that.

**CW:** What argument would you make against the stereotypical conception that poetry is inherently effeminate or impractical?

**PH:** What do you mean by “effeminate?”

**CW:** I think a lot of salt-of-the-Earth types picture—sort of a Lord Byron-esque, never-worked-a-day-in-his-life stereotype when they think of poetry.

**PH:** Oh, yeah. Something frivolous; “real men don’t do that.” Yeah that’s uh—that was perfectly—[laughing]—especially in the culture of the United States, that was perfectly illustrated once when, on a camping trip, on a river between Wisconsin and Michigan, I forget the name of the river, but anyway we took a canoe down the river—my friend and I. As evening drew closer a group of obviously college boys were setting up camp on the other side of the river. As the evening wore on and the beer got guzzled we could hear their conversation quite clearly and one of them, I could hear him say, “Well, what should we do now? We could read poetry—ha ha ha.” As if that would be the most ridiculous thing to do! Unfortunately I think it does have the image of—I don’t know if “effeminate” is the right word, but frivolous, useless. Definitely impractical. There’s no question about that. It is considered useless, and yet...Poetry has, if you broaden the definition in terms of song, no militant culture has ever lacked poetry in that sense. I was thinking about that the other day when I heard the traditional Army song. [singing] “Over hill, over dale...the *caissons* go rolling along.” That’s the version I heard. Now they’ve changed it to “the *army* goes rolling along.” I didn’t like that. First of all “army” is a soft word; caissons—I don’t know what the hell a caisson is—probably an artillery piece—but my point is—W.H. Auden once said “poetry makes nothing happen.” I’m not so sure of that. Because even good rhetoric has a poetic quality to it. When JFK in his inaugural speech said, “ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,” that’s good

rhetoric, and rhetoric is connected with poetry. Poetry is broader than just a poem or something we call a poem. So, no, it's not totally impractical. It has a lot of significance and importance.

**CW:** Is there an aristocratic or “acquired taste” aspect to poetry, in that personal development is required in order to fully enjoy it? Or is it for the masses, with the poet's job being to render their art universally appealing?

**PH:** Both. It's definitely both. It's an acquired taste and, the great poets will always be appreciated by the masses. That's part of what makes them great, I think. Poetry now has become so esoteric and, you might call it “sophisticated” with brackets around that word. But yeah, a poet like Robert Frost—anyone who's barely literate can understand a poem of his. The effete poets might think of themselves as an aristocracy, but real poets I think want to be understood by the masses.

**CW:** What is the most difficult part of teaching others how to write poetry; what common mistakes do poets-in-training make?

**PH:** Well, that's two separate questions. Let's deal with the first one, first. Getting them to ignore their preconceptions about what a poem or poetry is—it's not particularly difficult but you have to be very emphatic with them to try and have an open mind. For example, the biggest problem with beginners writing poetry is that they feel it should have end-rhyme. I say end-rhyme specifically because that's the most dangerous kind of poetry for a beginner to try to write, where the word at the end of each line rhymes. Like Robert Frost—“whose woods these are I think I know/his house is in the village though...my little horse must think it queer/to stop without a farmhouse near.” That's end-rhyme. OK. But there is internal rhyme when words rhyme in different places in the poem. That's not so distracting. End-rhyme is distracting. And people who are learning to write poetry, if you allow them to do end-rhyme you inevitably get

them to distort the poem away from what real poetry is. Real poetry has strong imagery and ideas. Metaphors, all of those traditions. So, end-rhyme is the great enemy. And you have to be a real master, like Robert Frost [to use it properly]. He believed poetry which did not rhyme was like playing tennis without a net. I don't agree with that, but I do agree that the beginner should write free verse, learn to express themselves, what they really feel, really think, and rhythm—rhythm is great if they avoid end-rhyme. Now, the most *common* mistake that's most rampant today—it's almost a disease—is to think that their inner thoughts and feelings are worth something just by putting it on a page. That's partly because they haven't been willing to—

anyone who takes poetry seriously should be a student of the history of poetry. He should know some Shakespeare, some Milton—Whitman, Dickenson. The most common heresy today is to think that you can develop something called “a voice” just from inside of you. That's truly a bunch of B.S. We acquire a voice from a lot of study, a lot of experience, and a lot of reflection. “Voice” meaning a distinctive style. So, to avoid that of course is to—in my career, at several turning points, I learned how to write different kinds of poems. It wouldn't have occurred to me for example, early in my life, that you could write a portrait of a person. Just describing a person, like a painting can be a portrait. It wouldn't have occurred to me until I ran across some poets who wrote those types of poems. Also, it didn't occur to me that you could just describe nature without saying anything *about* it and create a really nice poem until I discovered Kenneth Rexroth, who's magnificent not only in his nature poems but his reflections about it. Also, what is really helpful for a poet to do, is to take a poem by someone who he considers a master and copy it out word-for-word in his own handwriting. Why is that good? It domesticates the poem. You think of a great poem like I quoted before, Robert Frost's “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” OK. That's a great poem. For a student to copy it out by hand as if he had written it

brings it down to Earth. It's no longer "a great poem written by a great poet." It's something that *he* could have written. Let's take another example, Walt Whitman. Just to copy out his words... The main thing is to, when somebody does something in a poem that you really like, study that and copy it out and let it become part of your soul just like students of visual art will go to a museum—at least the smart ones will—to study the techniques of the masters and learn from them.

**CW:** Can a poem be excellent on the page but mediocre when performed aloud, or vice-versa? Or does the quality of a poem depend upon it being viable in either context?

**PH:** It has to work in both ways. The most important though, is off the page. How it sounds. Poetry can exist without a written language, without an alphabet, without anything. So, in order to really think clearly about something you have to understand its essence. What is it and how is it distinguished from other things? And so, if you agree that a poem can exist apart from written form, written on a page, then you'd have to say that the essence of poetry does not exist on the page. But when it gets onto a page it has to look nice and make sense, y'know, grammar, spelling. I know E.E. Cummings was in vogue at one point because he was against grammar and punctuations—I've got nothing against E.E. Cummings but generally poems should function as any other... When they're written they should help you know how to read or perform them. For example, in free verse the end of a line generally means a pause when you're reading it. When you have a line in free verse that's just one word that generally means that word should be emphasized. So the performance of the poem has a lot to do with how it should look on the page. I've seen poems quite recently, published in quite prestigious literary magazines, which look like just a block of words. There's no indication about how that poem should be read aloud. To me that's insane. Because, if you agree that a poem is basically an oral entity, then when the poet

writes the poem down on the page he has an obligation to indicate to the reader how he wants it read.

**CW:** Of all the poems you've read, does one stand out which was particularly breathtaking to experience for the first time?

**PH:** Oh yeah, it got me started in my vocation—to write and to teach poetry. I was just browsing in a college library—that's kind of an archaic concept. Now we *browse* the internet. In those days it was often fun just to go to a library and pass by stacks of books and look at the titles, “oh that looks interesting, I'll take a look at that.” That's what browsing meant in the *antediluvian* times [both laugh]. So, I was browsing and I wasn't even that interested in poetry and I just picked up a collection of William Butler Yeats, flipped through it, and read this poem called “Under Ben Bulben.” Ben Bulben is a mountain—probably more like a big hill—in Ireland and I read it and thought, “Wow, this is really something. It's passionate, has interesting ideas.” But that's when I first realized that poetry was something more than just greeting-card verse. That it actually could express deep meaning, deep feeling, in a musical, rhythmic way. In a way that prose could not. It reached more into the soul. Poetry reaches more into the soul and the heart and the emotions than does prose. That's when I started thinking, “Gosh, maybe I could write a really neat poem like that someday.”

**CW:** You've imparted a love of poetry to many students and been published in many respected literary journals. Which of these accolades means the most to you?

**PH:** Oh, teaching students...I did several residencies, both short and long-term, in elementary schools and high schools. The experience that stands out is—when I'd come into a classroom I remember this boy, maybe a fifth or sixth grader who said, “Mister Hoheisel! Could we write a poem today?!” With great enthusiasm. I thought, “Wow. That's interesting.” Because generally

if you went to a class and said, “OK kids, we’re doing some writing today,” they’d *groan*, “Writing, what a waste of time.” But his enthusiasm, in an English class, to actually *write* a poem... The reason why students generally enjoyed my presence was because education is generally considered spoon-feeding facts and information to the young. That’s a perverted idea of education in the first place—which we don’t need to get into. But when a teacher like myself would ask them to express themselves from within them, their perceptions, their experiences, their thoughts, it’s like “Wow, the teacher wants to hear that? That’s important? That’s significant? Goodness gracious, what a strange thing. Yeah, whoopee, let’s write some poetry!”

**CW:** Thank you, sir.