



**Hans Magnus Enzensberger**

*The Poet Is an Omnivore*

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*Irena Grudzińska Gross:* Hans Magnus Enzensberger was born in 1929 in Germany, where he grew up and studied and where he lives today. He has resided also in many other places, including Scandinavia, Cuba, and the United States. He is the author of numerous volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, and travel writing, and he is active in German, European and American literary life as an editor and founder of periodicals, as translator and journalist. But most of all, he is a poet. He has received several very important literary awards, German and European, and he is a very strong presence in German and European social and political life. I can hardly think of any other person whose life better exemplifies the link between poetry and politics.

*HME:* I will spare you my thoughts about poetry because poetry, if it is worth anything, should be able to speak for itself. Theories come afterwards, not while you are writing. Since I've been at it for quite a long time, I can't assume that anybody has ever read a line of mine. Therefore, I am going to read some old stuff, not just the latest. I should mention that these poems were translated mainly by Michael Hamburger, David Constantine and also by myself - because every now and then I got impatient waiting for a translation.

This poem is probably from the 60s:

### *Middle Class Blues*

We can't complain.  
We're not out of work.  
We don't go hungry.  
We eat.

The grass grows,  
the social product,  
the fingernail,  
the past.

The streets are empty.  
The deals are closed.  
The sirens are silent.  
All that will pass.

The dead have made their wills.  
The rain's become a drizzle.  
The war's not yet been declared.  
There's no hurry for that.

We eat the grass.  
We eat the social product.  
We eat the fingernails.  
We eat the past.

We have nothing to conceal.  
We have nothing to miss.  
We have nothing to say.  
We have.

The watch has been wound up.  
The bills have been paid.  
The washing-up has been done.  
The last bus is passing by.

It is empty.

We aren't complaining.  
What are we waiting for?

This is another poem from the same 60s reflection:

*A Song for Those Who Know*

Something must be done right away  
that much we know  
but of course it's too soon to act  
but of course it's too late in the day  
oh we know

we know that we're really rather well off  
and that we'll go on like this  
and that it's not much use anyway  
oh we know

we know that we are to blame  
and that it's not our fault if we are to blame  
and that we're to blame for the fact that it's not our fault  
and that we're fed up with it  
oh we know

and that maybe it would be a good idea to keep our mouths shut  
and that we won't keep our mouths shut all the same  
oh we know  
oh we know

and we also know that we can't help anybody really  
and that nobody really can help us  
oh we know

and that we're extremely gifted and brilliant  
and free to choose between nothing and naught  
and that we must analyze this problem very carefully  
and that we take two lumps of sugar in our tea  
oh we know

we know all about oppression  
and that we are very much against it

and that cigarettes have gone up again  
oh we know

we know very well that the nation is heading for real trouble  
and that our forecasts have usually been dead right  
and that they are not of any use  
and that all this is just talk  
oh we know

that it's just not good enough to live things down  
and that we are going to live them down all the same  
oh we know oh we know

that there is nothing new in all this  
and that life is wonderful  
and that's all there is to it  
oh we know all this perfectly well

and that we know all this perfectly well  
oh we know that too  
oh we know it  
oh we know

And these poems are more recent:

*The Visit*

When I looked up from my blank page  
there was an angel in the room.

A rather commonplace angel,  
presumably of lower rank.

You cannot imagine, he said,  
the degree to which you're dispensable.

Of the fifteen thousand hues of blue,  
he said, each one makes more of a difference

Than anything you may do  
or refrain from doing,

Not to mention the feldspar  
or the Great Magellanic Cloud.

Even the most common Plantain, unassuming  
as it is, would leave a gap. Not you.

I could tell from his bright eyes -  
he hoped for an argument, for a long fight.

I did not move. I waited in silence  
until he had gone away.

And another poem:

***The Great Goddess***

She works away day and night,  
bent over her darning-egg,  
an end of thread between her lips,  
mending all manner of things.  
Ever new holes, new ladders.

Sometimes she nods off  
just for a moment  
or for a century. Then,  
pulling herself together,  
she is back at her needlework.

How tiny she has become,

tiny, wrinkled and blind!  
With her thimble she feels for the holes in the world  
and dams and dams.

*IGG:* The poet is an omnivore, you said. But, does the poet, while writing, act within a political sphere?

*HME:* Well, an omnivore can't possibly do without politics. We can't pretend to be free of politics, although this may not be one of the main pleasures of life. I don't say that politics is something that I would like to be bothered with. But it is sheer, crystal self-defense. If you don't defend yourself, it will swallow you up. In Europe, we have large experience with this sort of thing. And even in America every now and then there is a problem, isn't there?

*IGG:* When, as a young man, you were learning English and American poetry, one of the poets you loved, you said, was W. H. Auden. And Auden declared that every poem he wrote - and he was a political poet - was written out of love. Yet, your poetry does not touch love.

*HME:* Being an omnivore, of course, you can't *not* write about the erotic side of life, it is very important. For example, I wrote a poem called "About the Superb Qualities of My Wife," and it goes quite deeply into some detail. But it should not turn into *poésie rose*. There is a risk for love poetry to become a kind of rarified kitsch. This is also something I defend myself against.

*IGG:* In East European poetry, there are rarely love poems about wives...it is like in the English novel of manners: love is a subject of poetry only up till the wedding bells....

*HME:* Yes, *c'est l'amour fou*... Well, I somehow discovered, perhaps later in life, that monogamy is not necessarily a bad idea.

*IGG:* But I didn't mean to ask you personal questions. When Auden was writing about love, he was much more autobiographical than you are. In your poems your life is hidden.

*HME:* Yes, I need to take my distance. Some people use literature as a means of exposure. But it's also a very nice hiding place. Somehow I became what they call an intellectual and you can't really take the measure of things without a degree of distance. I had to learn this the hard way because, being born in Germany -(I was seventeen at the end of the war, but I'm not going to go into that) you had to take your distance from what was going on, from the world outside of you. So it is also a matter of self-defense.

*IGG:* You said that when you started to write, your poetry was very angry; there was a lot of rage because of the war and the language needed to be cleansed. Every poet keeps a certain distance from the language, but as I was listening to you reading your poems today, I was thinking that your attitude towards language is very sarcastic and bitter, that you show a lack of confidence in the language.

*HME:* That was probably very true when I started. It was not just the war, it was not just the bombings, which were perhaps not my worst experience. The air in which we lived was poisoned, and this was the worst experience, that acute hangover after twelve years [of National Socialism]. They did not just disappear magically in 1945. Everybody from the Eastern block had a similar experience because this lived on. So I felt at the time that I had to work in the sanitation department, so to say, but it was not a job that was a lot of fun. And to the degree that things have improved, step by step, that a more civilized society came about, I became less loud. If you can help it, why be shrill?... and I don't think that I am particularly harsh. I don't think that I am particularly satirical. No, it's another thing. There is poetry, even great poetry where you cannot find a trace of humor. That does not agree with me. Poetry is also a game, a playing with words, some kind of jugglery. In German letters there is a long tradition of high seriousness and high moral ground; I feel it as a kind of

constraint. To each according to his temperament, of course. I don't want to lay down the rule for other poets, let them do whatever they like. If they want to be pompous, it's their constitutional right.

*IGG:* The traditional German and Central European poet is somebody who writes in the maternal language, the language of his fatherland. You have spent a lot of time outside of Germany, as if in exile. You even wrote poetry in Spanish, and you translated your poetry into English. I was always very puzzled and interested in your escapes.

*HME:* Well, I can't claim the title of an exile because an exile is a person who was forced out of his place. The world is full of exiles, but I could have stayed and nobody would have bothered. We had a constitution, we had laws and the dictatorship was over. I was moved by a certain, perhaps natural, curiosity. And in the period after the war, after this sanitation job, which I mentioned, you run the risk of becoming obsessed with all this. In 1949 or 1950, before I went to a doctor, I did some research on his biography because, who wants to end up under the knife of a concentration camp doctor? And they were around, I can tell you. You left so this would not grow to be the only obsession in your life. Also, you can become prisoner of your so-called identity. Though, by the way, I don't buy this whole talk about identity. It is very bizarre that people don't know who they are. And then the notion that you have an identity that is like a cube, a solid thing is never true; it is a patchwork of different things. You go back two generations and you will find out that your great-grandmother was probably begotten by a gypsy, or somebody like that. There are thousands of things and up to a point you can even fiddle around with it, you can add little things. I spent eight years in Norway and I've become something of a Norwegian patriot. We are "pluripatriots."

*IGG:* I noticed also that your translations into English, your own translations, take liberties with your original texts. So your escape into another language is an opening?

*HME:* Well, that's the privilege you have if you translate yourself. A translator does not have such leeway. We also know that word-by-word

translation does not work. So, it is a matter of degree and a matter of context, because if I write a poem in German and there is something about the military, there's a whole military culture of Germany with its vocabulary and tradition. Now, if you translate that poem into English and you look at the British army, there is different vocabulary, different habits, even craziness is different. The military is always collectively a little disturbed, of course.

*IGG:* What is your literary pedigree? Whom would you mention?

*HME:* There is the vice of reading, which I acquired very early in the day. So, there is a whole crowd of them, going back to antiquity. I am suspicious of the cult of originality, because you go on with something, which has gone on for a long time before you, and it is quite foolish to pretend or to conceive of yourself starting from zero. That is neither possible, nor desirable. Also, I translate a lot from other languages, and of course it is not purely altruistic, it is also an egoistic thing to do, because if you take this whole thing to pieces you see how it works. You learn the tricks of the trade. Translating is also a *métier* of writing and it helps. The stranger the thing you translate, the better, because it gives you an insight into another world.

*Question* (from audience): In your essays you have spoken about the right of the reader to react to a poem, and to take a poem any way he or she pleases. But today you also implied that translators have a responsibility not to take certain liberties with a poem. So, thinking of the translator as a kind of reader, translating a kind of comprehensive reading, I wonder if you could speak about the differences between the rights of translators and of readers.

*HME:* An interesting and quite a deep question too, because as long as there are translators, there has been a dispute about this. But first of all I want to say something very elementary about translators: they have a right to be paid. They have a right to be respected. They have a right to a copyright, not to be robbed by the big publishing outfits. I was a

publisher for many years and I always fought on behalf of the translators. I call them the aristocratic coolies of literature. But that was not exactly your question. I think it is difficult to establish a rule; there is a gamut of possibilities. In the old times, for example, when you had a translation of a Sanskrit text, it was a matter of specialists, of professors who very often had a very good understanding of Sanskrit, but had no ear, and in that case, an interlinear translation would be the answer. If you have no tone, no ear, no music, nothing, why should you do it? And here is an interesting thing about the shelf life of translation. If it is an important text, you have to retranslate it every 50 years. If you read an old translation, you will notice that the text, if it is, for example, from the sixteenth century, in nineteenth century translation smells Victorian. So, this has to be redone. And there is a need of a kind of modesty involved; you realize that you are at the service of something. Finally the proof of the pudding is in eating. I once saw an anthology of Shakespeare's sonnets translated into German language and the same sonnet in a hundred versions, can you imagine? It is not so difficult to pick out the good ones, or at least eliminate the bad ones.

*Question:* I am a philosophy student here at Boston University, and in the past two years I have learned a lot about philosophy, but I haven't discovered how I can be a good person. My academic readings are so detached that they won't tell you that. So, can you tell me as an intellectual how can I be a responsible person in the world?

*HME:* I am sorry, it is a kind of question that I feel quite unable to answer. I believe that it is completely mistaken to think that makers of culture - artists, intellectuals, scientists, poets and all the so-called intellectual classes - are any better morally speaking than other people. I could make a long list of great poets, great writers, great artists who behaved in abominable ways. In the old days, you had a confessor and he would be able to advise you. But if you are not a religious person then, I think, there is nobody here. Some people go to the therapist. But probably the worst person to ask such a question is an intellectual. When you are in a fix, you should ask people close to you, somebody who really knows you,

probably your girlfriend, or your male friend. In such a fix probably it is not the worst guess to ask your girlfriend.

*Question:* Your landsman Georg Simmel wrote an essay called “*Der Fremde*” (“The Stranger”), and he argued there that the outsider, the marginal person, has a privileged view of society, that he saw people differently because of his position as an outsider. I am wondering if you could comment upon “the stranger” in the literary cultures, in German, in the Spanish, in the American culture, given the constraints the stranger faces. Secondly, why don’t we have in America public intellectuals as you do in Europe? And thirdly, the great distinguished German social science tradition was discredited, and afterwards German social scientists were looking outside, to American and English social scientists. Does this phenomenon happen in the world right now?

*HME:* Ah, good questions. I start with the last one because it is easiest to answer. Yes, there was of course a very strong invasion, if you want to call it like that, of Anglo-American culture, not just in literature, but all over the place, music being an obvious example, film, what have you. But that does not mean that all local particularities have evaporated. It is a complicated process of give and take, resistance and absorption. All society goes through this; you might say it has to do with the social immune system. An immune system allows all sort of invasions, otherwise we would have no bacteria in our body. But if you get an overdose of something, there is a reaction, an allergy, a rejection. Yes, there were some very influential American sociologists, like Daniel Bell, but there have been also quite original things, like Nicolas Luhmann’s social systems theory, which has no precedent in Anglo American social sciences. Of course, there is a long history of rift between Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophy, but I am not a specialist, I am a dilettante.

As for the stranger, it is certainly true. But we would be hard put to define who is a stranger, because it depends on the context. Poets, to take an example close to what we are talking about here, are a tiny minority and some of them feel badly treated by society. It’s an attitude I do not share,

but it is prevalent. There are all sorts of “strangenesses,” if this plural is permitted. It’s a natural condition to be a stranger...

And public intellectuals...they do exist in America, of course. In Europe, when there is some conference, some symposium, there are always a lot of American intellectuals there. The most rational and the most well informed critics of American society are Americans. They may be a minority, they may be “strangers,” but they are there. It always struck me that intellectuals in America are entrenched in fortresses which are called universities, and when you step out of the campus, even the famous ones are not much heard of at the outside. Perhaps this is why there is this question.

*Question:* I’m always aware of the play in your poems, of the wit and puns you were talking about, of the work on language. We have heard this evening a substantial number of poems in which the self is countering itself and arguing with itself. I wish you could say something about it.

*HME:* If there is depth, you better hide it; you better not put it on a plate. There’s a sense in which profundity works like a locomotive and I don’t like that - it should be implicit. I have a model, a dream, of a good poem that has the structure of an onion. First, it should be accessible to practically everybody, at least to more than just a select minority and then people who really like this first round of the onion can go on to the next level of understanding and there should be something there for them to find and so on and so on as long as you can do it. That’s one of the problems of the later poetry of Ezra Pound. I mean, it is written in such a way as to tell you, “Stay away, if you don’t belong to an elite of fifty people who can read Chinese and Latin at the same time.” I don’t share this attitude.

*Question:* We have heard much tonight about your sense of detachment, of the way you value distance. I seem to remember there was a time when you turned down a fellowship in the United States. It seemed that you put aside your skeptical distance to express your political stand.

*HME:* People don't choose the historical situations in which they find themselves, intellectuals least of all, because they have no power. So they find themselves in a given situation and they react. It was the time of the Vietnam War and I felt very uneasy. I was given a very generous fellowship at a university in New England. And they told me you can do whatever you like. But in a very gentle way it was suggested to me that I should avoid agitation, I should avoid direct involvement, I was a guest after all. How do you deal with such a situation? You can't shout at people who offered you a gift. So, I fell into the politics of gesture; it was a gesture, and now, I don't think very highly of the politics of gesture. I don't deny that I have political passions every now and then. That's true. But only when I really feel like it - it is not an obligation. Why should I keep away from such an enormous experiment as 1968? It was something worthwhile and I got enmeshed in it. There is always a lot of nonsense in all big social movements, there is also an element of lunatic fringe. But look at Solidarnosc in Poland. This was irresistible to a large part, and probably, the better, if not the best part of the intelligentsia in Poland. They played a historical role, and then afterwards when Solidarnosc degenerated, they quit.

*Question:* I am curious about your time in Cuba. Cuban poet José Martí devoted most of his writing to calling for a revolution. You label yourself as a poet who does not advocate. So I am wondering what poetic style do you feel brings political awareness most successfully to the reader.

*HME:* I come from a left wing political culture and that is why I took great pains to know the reality of so-called socialist countries. I spent time in Moscow, in Hungary, and in China. In fact, I have been to almost all the communist countries except North Korea. There is a kind of left wing people who have gotten all of their political ideas from books; I wanted to see for myself. You have to go there, avoid the official stuff and experience it for yourself. And my experience in Eastern European countries was that this will not work. In the end it petered out, it fell down. But Cuba was different, it was a place where, roughly speaking, three quarters of the people wanted a revolution, where there were no Russian tanks, there

was no outside pressure, they did it themselves. So I thought, now let's see if this works. That's why I spent a whole year there. I love the place and I like the people, but I came to the same conclusion: it does not work there, either. Now you can accept the Cuban line - "It's all the fault of the Americans" - but that's not the whole answer. There is something inherent in the system - and it's a one man show - it does not work. A society is always more intelligent than one man. That's a reality principle.