

## An Interview with Ronald Wallace by Wendy Vardaman

**WV:** You published your first book of poetry, *Plums, Stones, Kisses & Hooks*, in 1981, after writing two books of academic criticism and getting tenure in the English Dept. at UW-Madison. Had you written poetry in college and as an Assistant Professor, or did it come later?

**RW:** The first poem I remember writing was for a 7th grade music class at Webster Groves Junior High School in St. Louis. Mrs. Replogle asked the class of around forty students to listen to Ferde Grofé's "Grand Canyon Suite" and write a response. I was the only student who wrote a poem, and the teacher read it aloud in class and posted it prominently on the front bulletin board. At first I was a bit embarrassed, but when students I didn't even know approached me outside class with a certain amount of wonder and envy, I began to think maybe I'd be a poet. By 9th grade, however, when I discovered Emily Dickinson and had "the top of my head taken off," my friends had learned to scorn poetry and I quickly realized that, if I were going to read or write poetry, it would have to be in secret, which gave the whole project a kind of forbidden air. Although my grades didn't merit it, I talked my way into two advanced placement high school English classes, and had two teachers who changed my life--Wanda Bowers and Augusta Gottlieb. I read Edwin Arlington Robinson and Stephen Crane, among others and I imitated them, but showed no one (including my teachers) what I was doing.

At the College of Wooster (Ohio) in 1963—1967, I met other students who were writing, and we started a magazine called *The Shaft* which was designed to compete with the rather bland established campus literary magazine. It was also designed to feature our work, and I published my first poems there, modeled on Dylan Thomas, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, and, eventually, Sylvia Plath. In 1967, I entered the University of Michigan's PhD program, and quit writing poetry altogether, thinking it was time to get on with "serious" work, scholarly criticism. There were only three graduate creative writing programs in the country at that time--Iowa, Stanford, Johns Hopkins--and a degree in creative writing didn't seem very useful. One rainy spring day in 1969, however, as I was staring at my Victorian Poetry anthology and wondering what Tennyson was all about, I glanced out the window and saw a little girl in pink panties playing in a puddle and, for some reason, that image inspired me to start writing again and I haven't stopped since.

After I completed my PhD work at Michigan, my wife, Peg, and I sold everything we owned and bought one-way tickets to Europe. I wanted to try to write poetry seriously, but didn't feel that I could tell people that that was what I was doing. Poetry just wasn't a vocation one could legitimately pursue at that time, and, besides, I might fail miserably at it. I *could* tell people we were "traveling in Europe" and, once again, write secretly. It was in Grindelwald, Switzerland that I wrote the first poems I would publish in national literary magazines and that would secure me the job teaching at Wisconsin.

I was hired to teach creative writing at Wisconsin but it seemed clear to me that I was expected to (and wanted to) continue my scholarly writing as well and, as it turned out, it

was easier to get a critical book published than a poetry book. Hence, *Henry James and the Comic Form* (1975) and *The Last Laugh: Form and Affirmation in the Contemporary American Comic Novel* (1979), appeared before my first poetry book, *Plums, Stones, Kisses & Hooks* (1981). Evolving versions of *Plums* were rejected ninety-nine times over a period of five years before the University of Missouri Press published it in their Breakthrough Books Series.

**WV:** A number of your recent poems problematize the identity of poet—"Local Hero," for example, and "Les poètes célèbres." How long did you resist that identity?

**RW:** For many years I had a newspaper headline taped to my office door, *WALLACE NOW CALLS HIMSELF POET*. I think the article appeared in one of the local Madison papers, and referred to the fact that, in an interview about my first book, I said that I would have felt like something of a pretender had I claimed to be a poet before I had published a book. In fact, the first question people ask you when you say you're a poet is: "Oh? What have you published?" So, after years of saying I was a teacher and administrator and scholar who also wrote poetry, I began to say I was a poet. Of course, the identity of "poet" is problematic in many other ways in this culture as well. In "Local Hero" I play with the fact that my nickname from grade school days, "Rusty," caused a number of people in my hometown to confuse me with a well-known St. Louis hero, the race-car driver Rusty Wallace. The poem is a kind of whimsical acceptance of the fact that no poet is going to be as famous or heroic as a race-car driver in the popular mind. "Les poètes célèbres" explores another popular view of the poet as a pretentious self-important intellectual who hangs out in Paris cafés and has little to do with everyday experience. In resisting some of the competing clichés that are attached to poetry and poets I guess I'm trying to come to a clearer understanding of who the poet is and what poetry can do.

**WV:** Did you ever have or consider work that did not involve teaching or writing?

**RW:** I think I always knew I wanted to write (I kept a diary in fifth and sixth grades, something no other boy I knew did), but I wasn't at all sure I wanted to teach. When I got my PhD in 1971 the bottom was about to fall out of the academic job market, and my professors at Michigan warned me that if I didn't get a teaching job that year, I might never get one. However, I hadn't pursued the PhD in order to teach; I had pursued it because I loved reading and writing about literature, and I wanted to see if I could actually succeed in getting the degree. I figured I could always work in a library (something I did during the summers in college) or a bookstore. So, instead of trying for a teaching job immediately after graduate school, I went off to Europe to write. While there, I found myself taking extensive notes in my journal about how I might teach various things, and this suggested to me that maybe I did want to teach after all. When we returned from Europe it was too late in the year to apply for most teaching jobs, so I sold men's underwear in a St. Louis department store. The career salesman there learned that I had a PhD and took to calling me "Professor of Underwear." I had applied for a job teaching literature at Wisconsin, and gotten a rejection letter, and was wondering what to do next, when I got a call from Charles T. Scott, then chair of the Department at

Madison, saying that a one-year position in creative writing had opened unexpectedly and I was the only applicant on file with creative writing credentials (I had by now published eight poems in magazines). I had thought that selling underwear by day would leave me free in the evening and on weekends to write, but had found that when I got home from that work all I wanted to do was drink beer and watch TV. So I jumped at the chance to come to Wisconsin, and the one-year job turned into a thirty-three year career.

**WV:** What do you enjoy doing when you're not working or writing?

**RW:** One of my passions for the past twenty-five years has been my co-ed volleyball team, *The Grapes of Wrath*. We play in the Madison City League and have won a number of championships, playing teams now half our age. Everyone in the creative writing program knows that no matter what might be scheduled on a Wednesday night, I'll be at volleyball. When Billy Collins appeared here a couple of years ago, and asked why I wasn't at his reading, and learned that volleyball was a priority for me over poetry, he seemed a bit miffed. When I later explained that we were playing for the championship that night, he excused my absence.

My wife and I have a forty-acre property with a barn and old farm house fifty miles west of Madison in the hills of Richland County. We've raised goats and chickens in the past, and currently spend a lot of time mowing and maintaining trails and gardening.

I run four miles daily; I'm an avid card-player; I've spent a lot of time fishing (both summer and winter); I like to walk the beach at Siesta Key, Florida and hike in the Tetons and Cascades; my wife and I have traveled to Australia (where my daughter and granddaughter currently live), New Zealand, the Virgin Islands. A few years ago I painted both of our houses. I watch more TV than I should (though I'm considering writing a book of poems based on TV programs, and thus my TV watching would be "research").

**WV:** *Long for This World: New and Selected Poems* is your seventh poetry collection. You have a chapbook coming out with Parallel Press this fall. Would you describe it and any other poetry projects you're working on right now?

**RW:** Compiling *Long for This World* gave me an opportunity to assess my work over twenty-five years and I did notice major changes. My first book, *Plums, Stones, Kisses & Hooks* was highly lyrical, playing a lot with sound and image for their own sake, trying to capture, in words, the things of this world. I remember going through long categories of poems. I'd write a poem about something in the garden, tomatoes for example, and then I'd think: cucumbers! zucchini! potatoes! oranges! Everything seemed a subject for poetry. Many of the poems ran about twelve to sixteen lines. In *Tunes for Bears to Dance To* I moved to a more narrative mode, longer poems often dealing humorously with everyday experiences and domestic life. In *People and Dog in the Sun* I consciously tried to write a more discursive poetry, moving beyond the old maxim of "no ideas but in things" or the poem as "the thing itself," and into the realm of ideas. *The Makings of Happiness* was, for a long time, my favorite of my books, combining the lyricism,

narrative, and discursive modes of my first three collections in celebratory poems of family and rural life. *Time's Fancy* took a darker turn, exploring death and loss and mortality to a greater extent than I had in the past (the black cover is intentional). *The Uses of Adversity* collected 100 sonnets I'd written over an intense year, and ranged widely in theme and subject matter. The new poems in *Long for This World* are probably more complex and meditative than my previous work, perhaps work better to tease the reader into thought.

My Parallel Press chapbook, *Now You See It*, is composed in large part of poems written in response to my diagnosis of, and treatment for, prostate cancer two years ago. The disease made me think even more deeply about illness and mortality and (can I say it?) the meaning of life. When I first put the chapbook together, it seemed entirely too dark to me, because, despite the distress caused by the disease, I found that I was really pretty interested in all the cancer research I was doing and in the effects of the hormone shots and radiation. As the chapbook evolved, more humor found its way in, and I included some poems not directly related to the illness for balance and good measure. I think it turned out to be a fairly interesting and upbeat work, and, so far, it looks like I've got a long life ahead of me. I'm also working on my eighth full-length collection which will probably be published, if all goes well, in a couple of years. This manuscript currently contains poems from the chapbook, along with some of my darkest poems yet, about loss and mortality, disease and death. One section of the book is comprised of poems by and about a character named Mr. Grim, a kind of crotchety alter ego who visited me some years ago to bemoan his outcast state and comment on the general deterioration of the body and the world. The final section of the book, entitled "In the Realm of Possibility," ends with a poem entitled "All Manner of Wonder," and aims to recover the sense of celebration and joy that is questioned earlier in the book.

**WV:** You've written many poems about your father, whose illness and paralysis early in your childhood affected you and your work deeply. Could you comment on how being a father yourself affected your writing, and to what extent your daughters do or don't play a part in it? Was it hard for you to balance being a parent with being a poet?

**RW:** When I was living in St. Louis, having completed my PhD course work, and finishing up my dissertation, I ran into the poet, Donald Finkel, one day in the Delmar Loop. I was wondering how one could be both parent and poet, and when and whether my wife and I should have children. I knew he had a family, and was a highly admired and respected poet (and he had awarded me second prize in a local poetry contest, though I'd never met him), so I introduced myself and asked him what he thought about having children. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me and said, "Have children! You must have children! It's the best thing you can do for yourself and your poetry!" His vehemence took me by surprise, but I took the advice to heart, and it proved to be exactly right. In addition to all the other pleasures of parenthood, children make you see things with new eyes; they restore your balance and put things in perspective. Many of my poems came directly from the experience of being a father and watching my daughters grow and develop. Watching them develop language was especially inspiring, and listening to their fresh take on things generated many poems. My wife did much of the

child care, allowing me to devote time to my teaching, developing the creative writing program, and writing. In 1975-76 when my daughter Molly was three I had the year off on a grant and spent more time with her, which was a gift. Family in general, and children in particular, have been essential to my writing. When I sent my first version of *Long for This World* to my editor, Ed Ochester, he responded that it was about twice too long, and that I could fix that by just omitting a number of the poems about children, since there were so many in the manuscript. I hadn't realized, in fact, how many there were, but they far outnumbered those on any other subject.

**WV:** Has writing become easier or harder over the years?

**RW:** I think writing is always easy and hard. It's easy because you love doing it, and would often rather be sitting in a room, reading great poetry, or staring out the window, or meditating on your ideas and experiences, and playing with language, and making something out of nothing, than doing anything else. Time can disappear and you can feel more alive than you feel in about any other circumstance. It's hard because there's always the blank page, and often nothing comes, or you seem to be producing only junk, and think you'll never write again, and can feel more depressed than you feel in about any other circumstance. When you're writing well, it's easy; when you're not, it's hard. I think I'm writing more slowly than I once did. I don't feel quite the urgency to write something every week, and I'm less satisfied writing the "good" but minor poem. Where an evocative description of tomatoes once seemed enough to me, now I want a poem to transcend its subject and image and be "important." This means that I'm less often satisfied with the direction a poem is taking, and abandon it before it's finished. It's harder not to repeat oneself, so I find myself writing less.

**WV:** What makes a poem good? What are the common elements of your own best poems?

**RW:** When Howard Moss, the great former poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, was asked what qualified as a good poem, he simply answered "one I like." Now there are poems I know are "good," even though I don't particularly like them. I know *Paradise Lost* is good, but, I confess, I've never voluntarily (outside of the classroom) felt moved to slog through it. Gerard Manley Hopkins probably isn't as good, but I have spent hours running his musical lines through my head. I admire Milton; I love Hopkins. Rather than just repeat all the commonplaces about what makes a poem good--vivid, surprising imagery; persuasive, original voice; compelling music; emotional resonance; intelligence--I might just say that the poems that appeal to me most now are those in which the poet risks making statements of truth; in which the poet transcends the image without abandoning it. I used to be satisfied with the vivid and evocative description; now I want to be immersed in the beautiful and true. Carl Dennis is a master of this mode, and his Pulitzer book, *The Practical Gods*, is one of my current favorites. I want the sense in a poem that the poet has thought more deeply than I have about something, and can convey that to me with elegance, power and force.

**WV:** Besides the seven books of poetry, you've published three books of criticism, an anthology and a collection of short stories. What does writing outside of poetry offer you? Do you work simultaneously in multiple genres, or sequentially? Are you currently publishing short stories or non-fiction?

**RW:** I have found it useful over the years to write in several genres. When I'd find myself getting blocked up as a poet, it was refreshing to turn to criticism, or fiction, which both seem to draw on different modes of perception. With three genres to turn to, I could always be writing something. I tend not to write simultaneously in multiple genres, however, because, for me at least, they seem to require different kinds of concentration. Scholarship and criticism were, for me, an engaging kind of hard work and discipline. I got three ideas for books, all involving humor, as a senior in college (*Henry James and the Comic Form*; *The Last Laugh: Form and Affirmation in the Contemporary American Comic Novel*; *God Be With the Clown: Humor in American Poetry*). By the time I had finished those three books, the profession had moved on into areas of theory that held little interest for me, and I pretty much stopped writing criticism. I spent ten years, off and on, working on my short story collection (*Quick Bright Things*) and I have notes for other possible fiction projects. Right now, I'm concentrating on the poetry.

**WV:** You've published hundreds of individual poems in journals that include *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Sewanee Review*, and *The Southern Review*. Would you write if you didn't get published?

**RW:** I can't imagine not writing. I have always written, and I think that's so much a part of my identity that I could never stop. I didn't let ninety-nine rejections of my first book discourage me. However, I have always had good luck with the magazines, and I've had the benefit of an amazing editor, Ed Ochester, over the years, and it is very encouraging to know that you're not writing in a vacuum, that readers value your work. Without some feedback like that, some support, I think it would be very hard to persist. I know some fine writers who have struggled all their lives to publish their work, and continued to write in the face of rejection after rejection. I like to think I'd write whether I published or not, but I think it would be very difficult to maintain a belief in what I was doing, without some external recognition of its value. One reason I started the University Press poetry series here in 1985 was that I wanted to be able to give the kind of support to writers that I had gotten from editors over the years. Although we only publish two books from the 900 submissions we get annually, I personally read something in every manuscript, and try to jot at least a brief note to all those (and there are many) that deserve publication.

**WV:** When you wrote *The Uses of Adversity* (1998), your sonnet cycle, you drafted 400 poems in one year, then cut that number back to about 100 for the book. Was it difficult to let so many poems go? Is that typical of the way you work?

**RW:** I'm not sure why I got the idea I had to write a sonnet a day for a year, but I'm glad I did. It was one of the most vivid years of my life, as I worked all day to come up with a

new subject for a poem and threw myself into experience to generate ideas. It was also exhausting. Up to that point, I had generally tried to set a day or two a week aside to write something. I guess my average over twenty-five years was something like a poem a week; I'd publish maybe half of them in magazines, and maybe half of those would find their way into a book. Writing a poem a day was a real change, but I told myself from the outset that because they couldn't all possibly be good, I shouldn't worry too much about writing crap. I wrote a lot of crap, but not nearly as much as I'd feared I would. As it turned out, maybe two sonnets each week seemed good to me, so the final cut to 100 wasn't too hard. I also had my wife read all of them (she's a very good reader of my work), and she helped a great deal in the culling process. Seven years later, I still find myself looking back over the several hundred unpublished sonnets and rescuing some that seem better now than they did then. One or two will pop up in my next book.

**WV:** What is it about sonnets that seems to lend them to compulsive composition—I'm thinking of, for example, Berryman and Lowell? To what extent is the sonnet still a vital form?

**RW:** Just about every modern poet has written at least a sonnet or two. I could not have written a poem a day without the form, which, itself, helped generate the poems. John Ashbery once said that writing a sestina was like riding downhill on an old-fashioned bicycle: the pedals pushed your feet into directions they would not otherwise have gone. The form of the sonnet does the same thing; the length and meter and rhyme scheme push the poet into directions he might not have gone. The beauty of the sonnet is that, at fourteen lines, it is both long enough to explore a complex subject, and short enough to pack a lyric punch. A lot of free verse poems, in fact, run around fourteen lines, which seems to be a kind of "natural" length for a poem. The sonnet also builds tension into its contrast of octave and sestet, assuring that the poem will have a theme. For all its rigidity, the sonnet is also the supplest of forms, allowing all manner of playful experiment and plasticity. It's alive and vital and will continue to be as long as poetry is read and written.

**WV:** You've written in both form and free verse, and seem to go through periods where you've written mostly one or the other. Why is that? Which way are you leaning now? What are the advantages, to you, of writing in a more obscure form, say ballade or canzone? Do you worry that readers won't recognize the form, or does it matter?

**RW:** I went through a period when I was enamored of traditional forms. Partly, I grew up thinking contemporary poetry had to be in free verse (James Wright, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton were important models), but I became impatient with an aesthetic that seemed to shut out a whole tradition of poetry. When I rediscovered forms (and the "new formalism" was gaining momentum) I found them a breath of fresh air and variety in what had begun to seem stale and repetitive. I taught a course in writing contemporary poetry in traditional forms, and, as an exercise, went alphabetically through the glossary of our textbook (Phil Dacey and David Jaus's *Strong Measures*) writing the poems listed there. I'd find myself getting stuck on a letter, and, instead of writing just one ballade, I'd write a dozen. (I only managed to write three canzones). I don't care

whether a reader recognizes a form; I just care whether the form generated a good poem for me. That said, I do recall one time I had published a sestina in *The Atlantic* and was swimming at the Shorewood pool in Madison. A neighbor, a man I knew only slightly, was sitting on the other side of the pool, reading the magazine. Mid-afternoon he came running over to me, excitedly noting that he had just realized that my poem was in some kind of form, with all these repeating words. He hadn't been going to say anything to me about reading the poem until he saw the form, and that prompted him to approach me. I found that gratifying; form itself can carry interest and meaning.

After writing my 400 sonnets I spent some months unable to write anything. I had so mastered iambic pentameter that it had mastered me, and I couldn't think in any other line. I had to force myself to write free verse in an effort to get my voice back. Now, I occasionally find that a poem wants to be in a particular form, and I'm glad I know what the forms are so I can be prepared when one comes along, but I'm mainly writing in free verse.

**WV:** Sound seems very important to your poetry, whether formal or free verse. What do you think about poetry that deliberately effects a flat tone, or seems to pay little attention to sound?

**RW:** Robert Frost said "subject matter is important, but sound is the gold in the ore." Dylan Thomas said that poetry "gives sound to the shapes of the world." I think I was originally drawn to poetry for its sound (perhaps everyone is, from nursery rhymes and nonsense songs for children), and I originally placed sound above sense in my work. In college I was known as Gerard Manley Wallace. I'm less interested in pyrotechnical poetry now, and can be quite happy with the flat tone. Stephen Crane, one of my early influences, certainly wrote prosy parables; the current U.S. poet laureate, Ted Kooser, writes a fairly flat line, and I've always been a fan of his. I love Russell Edson's prose poems. The conscious decision to write in what is sometimes called "the plain style" seems completely valid to me; which is not to say that I admire poets with a tin ear, and there are some of those.

**WV:** You've said that you dissuaded your first students from writing in rhyme and meter. Do you require them to learn form now? Do you worry that you might be dissuading them today from something you'll change your mind about later?

**RW:** I dissuaded my beginning students from writing in rhyme and meter because that's what they thought made poetry. They'd read Wordsworth and Hallmark cards in high school, and thought if they tossed something out in rhyme and meter they had written a poem. Take rhyme and meter away, and you have to concentrate on other aspects of the music of the language and on image and idea. I developed my course in traditional forms for advanced students, who knew that poetry was more than its obvious trappings. Basically, I try to get my students to read everything they can, and try as many different modes as possible. I think the more range and variety a young poet is exposed to, the more likely they are to find their own voice.

**WV:** I read somewhere recently that humor in American poetry is “hot.” You’ve always had an interest in humor, and your academic research centers on it. Could you comment on the status of humor in poetry now, as opposed to when you began publishing in the early 80s? Is humor hot?

**RW:** Well, there has been more attention to humor recently, as a serious and important tradition in American poetry, growing out of Dickinson (the great comic self-deprecator) and Whitman (the great comic egoist). Frost, Berryman, Stevens, Kumin, Wagoner, Collins, Duhamel, all share in that tradition. In the 70s and 80s there seemed to be a prejudice against humor in poetry; somehow, important and "serious" poetry wasn't supposed to be comic. That's still true to an extent today, though when Billy Collins and Ted Kooser are selected poet laureates, the stock of humor rises. *Green Mountains Review* did a recent issue on humor in poetry, and I do see it getting more serious (but not solemn) attention these days.

**WV:** The relation between comedy and tragedy in your poetry, as well as in your life, is an intricate one. I’m thinking, especially about poems like “After Being Paralyzed from the Neck Down for Twenty Years, Mr. Wallace Gets a Chin-Operated Motorized Wheelchair.” How does one inform the other? What do you find funny? Is anything off limits?

**RW:** I think comedy is a way of celebrating life and experience, even in the face of what might be considered tragic. Some comedian (I forget who) once said, "if it hurts it's funny; if it doesn't, it isn't," and I think that's in large part true. For something to be deeply comic it need not necessarily be funny, though it often is. George Meredith, in his classic essay on comedy, talked about a "laughter of the mind." Comedy is a celebratory mode of perceiving the world and all its pain and suffering; it's an affirmative lens through which to view the human condition. My own comic style tends to be more in the Dickinsonian tradition of irony and self-mockery, than the Whitmanic tradition of broad humor and hyperbole, but I find both compelling and necessary. The older I get, and the darker my vision becomes, the more I value affirmation and celebration.

**WV:** Billy Collins has read to large audiences in Wisconsin over the past few years. Does it take a comedic poet to draw a crowd?

**RW:** It helps to be entertaining. Henry James once said that the worst sin for a writer is not to be interesting. I think too many poets, in their solemnity, aren't interesting. Like a good movie, a good play, a good novel, a good lecture, a good conversation, poetry should be interesting and entertaining. Billy Collins draws crowds not just because he's very very funny, but because he's accessible, convivial, smart. People know that when they come to a Billy Collins reading they're going to have a good time, and they're going to go away thinking about things.

**WV:** What do you think about the proliferation of readings and open mikes in Madison and throughout the country? Can a poet establish a book-buying following without

participating in these activities? What are the consequences to poetry of writing with the intent to perform?

**RW:** Most poets I know are not, by nature, particularly gregarious or flamboyant, despite some stereotypes to the contrary. Much of their time is spent, after all, sitting alone quietly in a room. Some are better performers than others, and a knack for performance probably helps sell books. A certain amount of self-promotion has, unfortunately, come to seem required of poets, and, as the editor of a poetry series, I'm always gladdened by a poet on our list who is eager to go out and sell books by performing poems. Readings do enable audiences to hear the poems in the poet's own voice, which can be revelatory. Some very difficult poets come clear aurally in ways they may not on the page. On the other hand, a lot of poetry written mainly for performance leaves me a bit cold. I'm not a big fan of poetry slams or "spoken-word poetry," though I do think those modes have opened poetry up to a wider audience, and that's good. I sometimes wonder if I had spent more time traveling about the country and doing readings and panels and workshops, and less time writing, I might have acquired a bigger audience for my work.

**WV:** A debate appeared in *Poetry* about a year ago regarding Garrison Keillor's role in promoting poetry through "The Writer's Almanac" and his anthology, *Good Poems*. How do you feel about efforts like Keillor's or those of Ted Kooser, who writes a newspaper column, or Collins, who has published the *Poetry 180* anthologies? Should more poets attempt to appeal to a larger audience? Will that help poetry sell?

**RW:** I think all three of these writers have done wonderful things for poetry. Garrison Keillor has read my work on "The Writer's Almanac," and Billy Collins included one of my poems in *Poetry 180*, so I'm naturally partial to them, but I do think they've broadened the audience for poetry. Before Kooser was appointed poet laureate and began publishing his newspaper column, I fantasized about doing just that; I thought if I were ever appointed poet laureate I would do a column called "The news from poems" after the famous lines by W.C. Williams ("It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there"). I think poets need, first and foremost, to be true to themselves and their work, and not worry too much about appealing to an audience. But whenever poets find themselves moved to try to broaden the poetry audience, I say more power to them.

**WV:** As a critic/poet you have written about the Whitman vs. Dickinson tradition of humor. How important is it that poets be able to see themselves as part of these larger literary traditions? Do you think poets are as knowledgeable about tradition today as they were when you went to college?

**RW:** I think that writing knowledgeably out of a tradition can only expand one's own work. When I'm writing a sonnet, I do have a sense of the whole tradition of sonnet writing underpinning and enriching my poem. I find that most serious poets these days are pretty knowledgeable.

**WV:** Could you over-generalize and point to anything that contemporary poets contribute to the American poetry tradition?

**RW:** There's been a healthy democratization of poetry. College workshop classes, MFA programs, publishing opportunities, the internet, have all led to an expansion of the possibilities of poetry. Rather than warring schools of poets, congregating in a few cultural spots around the country, poets and poetry are everywhere today, and that has been brought about largely by the poets themselves (with the help of such organizations as the Association of Writers and Writing Programs).

**WV:** You initiated an enormous amount of poetry infrastructure at the UW (at about the time the same thing was happening around the country in other universities): the Creative Writing Program, the UW Press Poetry Series, which awards the annual Brittingham and Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry, *The Madison Review*, and the post-MFA Institute for Creative Writing. What infrastructural challenges remain for American poetry?

**RW:** Employment opportunities for writers remain limited. Now that the university writing programs are well-established and staffed, but no longer expanding, new teaching jobs are hard to come by. The distribution of poetry books and magazines remains another of the largest challenges facing poets. A lot of good poems that are being written and published today receive little attention.

**WV:** These days, many writers get MFAs, not PhDs as you did—do you regret having spent so many years on academic research? How did that kind of work benefit your poetry? Which course would you advise an aspiring poet to take today?

**RW:** I have no regrets about my PhD and scholarly work, which, I believe, was essential to my poetry. And in 1967, when I started graduate school, the MFA wasn't a particularly prestigious degree. Through the dedicated work of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the MFA has now become the writer's equivalent of the PhD, carrying the same prestige and recognition as other terminal graduate degrees. I encourage my aspiring student poets to consider the MFA as an opportunity, not necessarily to acquire a teaching degree (though it is that), but to spend two years in a community of writers, working to perfect their art. With funding from a university, a student can look at the MFA experience as two years doing a low-paying job that you love. It beats waiting tables or driving cabs (or selling underwear).

**WV:** Do you enjoy teaching as much as writing?

**RW:** Both provide "highs." A good poem, a good class, a good conference, can be equally exhilarating. My teaching has fed my writing; my writing has fed my teaching. For me, they have gone hand in hand.

**WV:** Your poem "The McPoem" gets at one of the major criticisms of MFA programs, which is that they turn out students all producing the same kind of work: "small, domestic, fun for the whole/family. Economical, American. Free//of culinary pretension."

Is this an apt characterization of that poetry, or a caricature? Do you agree that what's coming out of University poetry programs is free of pretension?

**RW:** That poem is titled after a comically derogatory phrase of Donald Hall's, referring to the workshop poem as "the McPoem: fifty billion served." While I see Hall's point, I also see value in the competent, reliable poem. Personally, I like McDonald's food--always have. I can be critical of it, but I do like to stop by occasionally for some Chicken McNuggets and fries. There's a lot of variety coming out of university writing programs these days, from the most basic to the most elaborate repasts. I don't want to dismiss any of it. And McDonald's has a pretty nice new walnut apple salad.

**WV:** Have you ever workshopped your poems?

**RW:** Actually, beyond a summer class with Robert Hayden back in 1969, no. Which may be an odd thing for a workshop instructor to admit. If I believe in the value of workshops, why not submit my own work to that scrutiny? The answer is, in part, historical. Early in my career, when I could most have benefited from workshop critiques, there was little opportunity. I have, over the years, relied on my editor, Ed Ochester, and my wife, Peg, and, very occasionally, a fellow-writer or colleague, for useful commentary on my work-in-progress.

**WV:** Whom do you like to read? To what extent do you balance contemporary and canonical, American and international poets?

**RW:** I read everything I can. When I first came to Wisconsin I read through most of the contemporary American poetry books in the Memorial Library, alphabetically, by author. This resulted, among other things, in my anthology, *Vital Signs: Contemporary American Poetry from the University Presses*. Before it folded two years ago, I always read David Wagoner's *Poetry Northwest* magazine cover to cover, to see what was new on the poetry scene. My PhD training gave me a strong background in American and British literature. I recently discovered Robinson Jeffers, whose poems of the "geologic sublime" have a special appeal for me, and I'm currently reading some world poets in translation in an effort to move beyond my narrow American bias--Neruda, Vallejo, Trakl, Machado, Ponge, Ekelof.

**WV:** Which Wisconsin poets do you read? which do you teach?

**RW:** I hesitate to name names, since I'll invariably leave some good poets out, but I'm partial to my colleagues, Jesse Lee Kercheval, Amy Quan Barry, Roberta Hill, Amaud Johnson, Heather Dubrow. I'm a great admirer of Milwaukee's John Koethe. Max Garland up in Eau Claire is an old friend and a wonderful poet. Dennis Trudell. David Steingass. Robin Chapman. Anne-Marie Cusac. To name a few. There are a lot of terrific poets in Wisconsin.

**WV:** How would you characterize Wisconsin's poetry?

**RW:** Eclectic and various.

**WV:** Do you think poets who live in Wisconsin are at a disadvantage from those who live in urban centers, say Chicago or New York?

**RW:** Once upon a time I think that may have been true, but not any more. There are, in fact, some advantages to being a bigger fish in a smaller pond.

**WV:** It seems to me, as a poet who belongs to the WFOP (Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets) and publishes in state venues like *The Wisconsin Poets' Calendar* and *Free Verse*, that there is a certain lack of interaction between those who are active in these organizations and poets within the state's university system. I heard a younger poet from UW-Madison at the Madison Book Fest last year say that she didn't realize there even were poets outside the university until she went to Book Fest. What do you think? Do we need more interaction? Whom would it benefit?

**RW:** The more interaction the better; there's a very active writing community beyond the university, and we do try to make ourselves and our students aware of it. Time is the major problem, though. With readings nearly every night somewhere in the area, with competing university and community events, it's hard to keep up with all of them. The issue of town and gown does represent a problem, but it's not as big a one here, I think, as it is in many places. One thing that makes Madison unique is the richness and congeniality of its arts community, both on and off campus

**WV:** Do you encourage students to publish in-state? To what extent do you offer your work to state journals, of which there are at least a dozen now?

**RW:** I do encourage students and colleagues to publish locally. I have found occasional resentment, however, when I've published in local magazines over the years, from some writers who have argued that I should publish nationally, and not take up space in the local magazines that should be serving less established aspiring writers. Thus, I've been a bit chary of submitting too often to state journals. On the occasions when I've been privileged to receive invitations from a local editor to submit, I always do. I recently had a poem in Tuschen's State Street Poetry Sheet series, and I have a poem coming out soon in *Rosebud*, both as a result of an invitation to submit. I'm always pleased when my work shows up in *Free Verse*.