

7/2/1982

The Writers Forum Presents

Wayne Dodd

When there is no snow.
They look so different in March pecking among
rain spatters on a board. The slate of their
heads and shoulders beginning to turn rusty
as a turning earth. Winter gets it all down in
black and white. Beauty is found in contrasts.
The small sharp line a knife makes between the
still and the quick. A column of wood smoke
rising straight up into the empty cold of
January. Therejuncos hop like survivors, like
sharp inhalations of breath. But when every
bush and branch and bramble catches the eye
with color and your life suddenly turns towards
you like a childs splashed red with question,
snow birds like us, lose all their deffinition.

Judy Kitchen: Welcome, todays guest is Wayne Dodd. Poet, Professtr. of English
at Ohio University and the editor of The Ohio Review. His
latest book The Names You Gave It was published be LSU press in
1980. With us today is Mary Elsie Robinson who is on the summer
faculty in fiction. Her latest book The Clearing was published
this week by Atheneum, and in 1980 she won the AWP award for her
first novel After Freud.

Mary Elsie: Wayne, we wanted you to read poem because we would like to have
you talk about your self as a poet before we move to the literary
magazine and your particular magazine. Do you think its important
for you to be a poet as an editor, and could you talk a little
bit about your role as a poet.

Dodd: Well its a hard question really, I've wondered about it my
self a lot of times whether these are really self supporting
or mutally supporting enterproses. For my own part, K guess
I have mostly felt that what I do as a wrifter, which is I
guess a kind of self examination and search of ones life and ones

experience. Always the quest for some kind of resonance and sense of abiding importance to things, events, and experiences and people. I've always felt that that search was fundamental actually to writing and that somehow it probably at least energizes my work as an editor too, in that I believe that what I find, what I look for in the work of other people, that is when I'm trying to select work for The Ohio Review, when I'm imagining an issue for the future and when I'm looking for things for it is a similar quest, that is a search for that which energizes, that which sustains, that which touches and that which also validates. Because I always think that writing is in a way a validation of one's life. A validation of one's being, a validation of one's self. Probably that conviction is always imbedded in any judgment I make about other people's work as an editor. In other words, whether I think I'm seeing that same kind of validation, that same kind of interest, that same kind of commitment.

Kitchen: Some editors seem to get validation in fact just in producing the magazine and in the discovery. You're saying in a sense that the writing gives you something above and beyond that.

Dodd: Oh yes. I think it does. The two roles really are separate and separable, and I have no illusions about that. That really for me writing poetry in particular, is a rather primary gesture. And I'm always looking to forward and further that primacy gesture in other people. So the editorial work I see as an expression of a devotion to the same thing, but it isn't coming out of the same mode of expression. I'm devoted to it in myself as well as in others, perhaps if that makes sense. I'm looking for it there too.

Robertson: Yes, it seem that many poets would not make very good editors. The qualities that you need to be a good poet seem to me to be different from those you need to be a good editor. You never find these two things in conflict? For you they work?

Dodd: I never find them in conflict. You may be right. In fact, I suspect that you are. There are some people who wouldn't make good editors and some editors don't make good writers. But I don't find them in conflict. At the risk of sounding self-directed, I think that it is an editor's...the most fundamental need that an editor has is that of being able to read with real sensitivity and...sensitivity, I'll stick with that. What somebody else has done. I don't believe being able to write well can ever be a hindrance to that. I think it is always

an advantage. There may be other things that get in the way. There may be other reasons why a writer won't be a good editor, but surely it won't come from the fact that he has experienced in his own work the hard on-going work of revision, which is really creativity of art anyway. There's no way in which the sensitivity that he continually develops and that work won't be to his advantage in reading someone else's work, I think.

Robertson: That's true.

Dodd: It certainly seems true to me.

Robertson: There is a certain generosity that it seems to me in being an editor. You're putting a lot of time and energy into other people's work. I wonder if there's ever...well most writers are struggling to find time for their work. Are you ever bothered by that. That you feel you're giving too much of your time to other people?

Dodd: I'd be less than candid if I ^{didn't} say I do feel that conflict. Yes, I frequently feel that the editorial work pulls me away from doing the writing I'd like to do myself. I guess that's a kind of conflict in terms of management of personal energy and time. Maybe rather however, the conflict in the two...between the two roles.

Kitchen: Could we ask you to read one more of your poems? Maybe even talk a little bit around it or before or after to give some sense, again, of your self as a writer; the man behind the magazine.

Dodd: Sure.

Night Poem

It's always afternoon somewhere in the mind
that long slow drift from noon to night
Scissor tails slanting across the sun like
like inevitable happiness. In the giant elms above
sequitas buzz their seventeen year tune up for now.
I close my eyes. Everything is right where it should be:
the house, the fence, the grove of cherries snug against
the henhouse. Inside the kitchen my mother carries bowls
of heat, back and forth, back and forth, like eternal life.
The grass, everything around me is filled with motion,
spreading toward perfection.

Now in the darkening present I hear my own
small son coming home to supper, the evening
already beginning to form in his mind.
Fireflies pulling the earth and sky together--
Stop there. Let it go one forever.

So, what I could say about that poem I don't know. I suppose I could attack it from a lot of angles. To me the most important moment in the poem, when I was writing it, was the discovery of the image of "mother carrying bowls of heat back and forth." That's when I really "solved" the emotional problem of the poem, that is to say that's when I found the kind of emotional direction the poem was yearning for or aspiring to, as well as needing to take. That's when I got the sense of the life of the speaker as time-drenched and in conflict always with the notion of eternity and it helped to bring into, for me, immediate temporal focus. To vastly removed in time moments of one's life, from childhood to present. So that^{was} the image, ~~was~~ the center of that poem for me, as the maker, making the poem and trying to find where it could go. After that, I didn't find it as hard.

Kitchen: Do you look for a central image of that nature, do you think when you're looking at work? Obviously you edit both fiction and essays, and poetry. In the poems themselves, do you...

Dodd: You mean when I'm reading someone else's.

Kitchen: When you're reading someone else's do you look for a moment which somehow strikes a poetic kindred spirit?

Dodd: Well I think probably in that respect I ^{doubt} / I'm ^{much} different from other people who read poems ~~with~~ real affection, pleasure and devotion. I look for the poem that will suddenly discover something to me. Even if it only discovers the great emotional, intellectual, spiritual content of itself. And I think that that most often does happen with some kind of striking moment, imagery or language, freshness of perception. When Barfield once, I think it was about sixty years ago, fifty years ago, wrote a book called Poetic Diction in which he suggested that the real pleasure in poetry comes from the moment of suddenly, instantaneously being moved to another level of perception, that is to say a level of perception of receiving the sensibility and achievement that's making the poem. All of

a sudden one sees it that way, one perceives that way. and that there is a kind of literal as well as metaphoric motion that occurs then that is pleasurable. I look for that kind of moment to occur, and when it does I pay close attention to that work.

Kitchen: How often does it occur? By that I mean...how many...let's get into the nitty-gritty of the magazine. How many submissions do you get? What kind of percentage can you publish? And how do you feel the state of the art is today?

Dodd: Well, we get thousands of submissions every year and the state of the art at least in terms of liveliness and activity of writers is obviously good. A lot of people are writing and writing well, it seems to me. So I find it most often distinction I have to make as an editor is really between those works that obviously are good, well-made, serious, work well, and the ones that are something just beyond that. The ones that won't go away and their effect on one that move one to tears or laughter. That nag one to come back to it and hang around. Wake me up in the night and is truly present in my mind again. I find that my real work is to distinguish between those two, not between good things and bad things.

Robertson: Do you find that there are perhaps more good writers today than perhaps there were some time ago. I ~~think~~ thinking all these creative writing programs turning out people with MFA's in creative writing and so forth. There seems to be a great many people writing. Do you think that there is more good stuff...

Dodd: I don't know. I know that we, at The Ohio Review, get more good stuff now than we did ten years ago. Whether that is ...I don't know what you could extrapolate from that. There's no doubt about it that creative writing programs or workshops in the country in the last decade has produced, has created, a large body of writers. I mean that's what they are. And what writers do is write, and these people write. And the final part of writing is the act of publication of some kind and these people publish. And so there is a lot of activity and a lot of ferment and a lot of vitality. I have to be honest: I really don't know what is the ultimate value of that, whether that is a bad thing or a good thing. Once in an interview I did with Robert Bly when I was interviewing him for The Ohio Review, he suggested he thought it was not necessarily a particular good thing. A lot more okay poems were being written. He thought it would be better

maybe if there were fewer of those and more really first-rate pieces. And that's a persuasive notion.

Robertson: But there are perhaps more readers.

Dodd: That's the trick. I think we've created, produced a sensitive, large readership.

Kitchen: Does your circulation bear this out?

Dodd: Oh yes! I think it does. Our circulation increases constantly, every year it gets higher, and writers read The Ohio Review. I like that for all kinds of reasons. I feel flattered by it. I think that's a vote of confidence by people who have demanding standards. And I think it also simply argues what you're suggesting. We've created a large readership.

Kitchen: This raises a question for me. We're calling this ^{the} literary magazine in 1982. You are a literary magazine at The Ohio Review and yet and the readers that you have, where are all these other readers, the people, that maybe the commercial presses are publishing? Where are all the best sellers? Why can't we find a way to make the best story in The Ohio Review a best seller?

Dodd: That's what I would like to know. Well, sometimes it gets to be a crossover there. For example, Ray Carver has become a really good seller, and he still publishes in quality magazines like The Ohio Review and Anteus and Tri-Quarterly and, and yet his work really sells well. But, for the most part, as you well know, we have a fixed readership. It is a good and a sizeable one, but it is not a mass audience. I think that is simply true of what, for want of a better term, we call serious writing today.

Robertson: Well, I'm thinking particularly of fiction because there never was too much outlet for poetry anyway I suppose; but the outlet for fiction certainly has grown smaller in the commercial presses. There's no question about this. It seems to me that places like The Ohio Review provide an absolutely necessary service that without those there would be no outlet for a lot of very good literature.

Dodd: Absolutely.

Kitchen: Do you feel that your validation in some sense creates some of the people who then will go on and write, say, the next large story and the novel? Talk about your role...

- Dodd: Well, I think, I think there is a mutually supportive role between say, the literary magazine and the reader and then the literary magazine and the writer. I have from the beginning of The Ohio Review conceived on it as an actual instrument to the continued creation of American literature. It helps to create taste and to foster good writing to make sure it has a place to be seen and, therefore, can be read. I think, for example, as you rightly pointed out it's much more disquieting nowadays. The much more disquieting fact is that good fiction has a vastly reduced outlet and the major publishing houses are just dying it would seem to put down the moral burden of having any kind of serious custodianship of American fiction. They all want to write the quick selling how-to books or now the very quick selling romances, things of that kind. So, yes, I find that the most disquieting and, therefore, our role as fosterers of serious, probing, experimental--I don't really want to say experimental--grouping fiction I see as one of our most serious.
- Robertson: Have you ever considered the possibility of publishing book-length, short story collections?
- Dodd: Not only considered it, we're going to do a volume next year, so for the first time. Been thinking about it for a long time. It's always a matter of money and one does that with trepidation, fear and trembling. I don't know how well we can market it.
- Robertson: Must you make a profit?
- Dodd: No no. Don't have to make a profit, but you can't lose too much money. There's a limit to how much money you can lose, how many people you can get to pick up how much money.
- Kitchen: Well, you certainly have a reputation; a wonderful reputation with The Ohio Review and, recently I've heard over and over that some of the best fiction in the country is being printed in The Ohio Review.
- Dodd: We like to think that.
- Kitchen: Could you speak to the poet choosing the fiction? Does that ever cause any...
- Dodd: Well I don't know. I don't ever have any difficulties with that. In this respect I think I'm just another reader. I like to think a sensitive one, a sympathetic one, a good one, and an enthusiastic one. I really enthusiastically like to read and, especially,

literature that seems to me good, seems to be worthwhile. And, so I also have written fiction so I can look at it I think from two sides and in that respect really not be all that indifferent from what I am in my role as judge of poetry. So I don't feel any conflict there, no, or any difficulty.

Kitchen: Talk about, a little bit about, well, just your process. I think viewers might want to know your process of reading a little and maybe discovery--how you view yourself-- as a discoverer.

Dodd: As a discoverer.

Kitchen: Yes.

Dodd: Well, I guess the, the greatest pleasure that one can get from editing, maybe the only real pleasure is when one feels that one has come upon something that is terrific, is exciting. On those days when it happens, and that doesn't happen everyday, but on those days when that does happen--a poem or story--I find myself very often even now, ten years later, eleven years really, making someone stop and listen to it. I buttonhole somebody in the office and read them a passage, or a section or a whole poem or say read this. The innocence, the elation I think of sharing but also of discovery, authentic discovery; but I think, of course, we all do that when you read anything. You certainly feel you've discovered it, because you have discovered it. Others have discovered it before but first time, for example, I mentioned Ray Carver. The first time that I read a Ray Carver story, a wonderful moment of discovery--other people had made the discovery before me. And, but then sometimes there's the additional one of coming on somebody who you really have discovered and somebody else hasn't discovered it before you.

Robertson: Could you list some of those people?

Dodd: Well, I recently had this experience or very recently published a chapbook collection of poems in The Ohio Review by such a person. His name is Bruce Wetterock. And, in each issue of The Ohio Review we have a small chapbook usually 16 pages of poems right in the center with its own cover and everything bound right into the magazine. And one day I was reading a submission of poems and it came in from one Bruce Wetterock although I wasn't paying any attention to

the names, I was reading the poems. There were five of them. And I was just delighted by each poem I read. And liked as much or maybe more than the one before. And I finished that, and I thought, well, I'll try to figure out how to pick some from among these. This went on for a couple of days. I never could pick from among them. I loved all five of these poems. I thought they were really delightful, fresh, and original poems. Wonderful kind of bouquet, and the language and the simplicity, and depth. And they were touching. So I asked our office manager, since there was no return envelope, where these came from. So I decided I might want to try to get more poems from that man, and maybe get enough for a chapbook. Or, at least, look at more. And he told me that the poems had just been brought in and left in the office. That almost never happens. I only can think two or three times ever it's done that. So I said, "Does he live around here?" So he said, "Yes, I think he lives in the hills here about, around Athens." People live on Ridges, I live on Peach Ridge. He lived on Scatter Ridge. And so I got the phone book, found his number, and called him up. And asked him if he could come see me, and he did, and brought more poems. Enormous sheath of poems like that. Found he had a very interesting background--interesting man's done all kinds of things. And he had been writing poems for years. He once, in fact, took an MFA from Iowa years and years before, in fiction, though, he studied fiction. And he'd been writing poetry in you might say, not secret, but in the privacy of his own hollow-out home in Scatter Ridge. And so I've, he's a fascinating man. Shy, reclusive, genuine, and a fine artistic temperament. I got out of that a small chapbook volume of poems that I've put in here. And so I discovered in that sense, Bruce Wetterock, I don't say that to take any credit for it. I say that to define that pleasure. That was an authentic discovery. I knew it, was elated and delighted by it.

Kitchen: In a minute, I would like you to read one of your discoveries. But I'd to just backtrack for one second. Do you have readers, do you have discoverers discovering for you, or how do you operate?

Dodd: Well I can't read everything that comes in, no one could. So I, we do have a screening process that goes on, you might say. I shouldn't call it really a screening process. But there are other people who read.

Kitchen: You must have to trust them?

Dodd: I trust them too--certainly--I surely do. I trust them to do what they set out to do which is to discover those things which they think really, quite genuinely, don't deserve or require, I guess I ought to say, further consideration. That's what they set out to do. And then to pass on those things that surely ought to be looked at and thought some more about. Obviously, most of the things that get passed on and get thought more about don't get published either. It's a matter of numbers. I read nowadays only those things that somebody has already felt was worthy of being looked at again. So that's our process.

Kitchen: Somebody that you trust.

Dodd: Yes, well, I have three associate editors, but they read only fiction

Kitchen: Oh, they read fiction.

Dodd: Only read fiction, yeah.

Kitchen: So you do all the poetry?

Dodd: Just about. yeah. Sometimes I get a little help with that.

Robertson: Well, are you reading at midnight, most nights, it sounds to me as though this must be very tiring.

Dodd: That's one of the great time-consumers on it is to read those works. As a matter of fact, most people, I always had a bedside book I'd call it. I would always, and still do have a bedside book, or two. And I read before going to sleep, at night. I always also have some manuscripts that are bedside books, so almost every night I will read something that I have that needs to be read. I never make a decision at that time, It's too late at night; I would never do that. I'd just say a positive decision. I often know when I can make a big decision, and I'll decide not to read that again.

Kitchen: Well, thank you very much, Wayne. We would like very much to close by listening to your discovery and what you feel represents somehow the best of young poets in the Ohio Review.

Dodd: Well, let me read this poem of Bruce Wetterock, since I was just talking about him. This is from his chapbook called Life in Progress. I think it is representative of the kind of great energy and joy here in these poems. This is called "Remembering Rosalind."

Ah, those misty September mornings
As though you could take the tree by their shoulders
And slide them lightly here and there over the bumpy ground

Like dancing with the drunken girl, Rosalind,
Shuffling and laughing across the wooden floor
Ripe as a melon going on nineteen
Her shoulders firm beneath her sweaters.
Morning, a marble rolling in your pocket
A cricket in the cold cellar
The Earth tilting under your feet.
The Earth has been going on 4 billion years
But when were there ever days like these?