

Interview with John Wood

(conducted by Estella Ramirez via e-mail on January 22, 2008)

FRONT PORCH: You founded the creative writing MFA program in McNeese State University. What motivated you to do this, and why at McNeese State? What were your goals for the program?

JOHN WOOD: First of all, so many thanks for wanting to interview me. It's a pleasure and honor, and I really appreciate it. When I arrived at McNeese in 1976, there was no MFA program in creative writing anywhere in Louisiana. The closest ones, as I recall, were in Arkansas and Alabama. Of course, now they are everywhere. I was quite taken with South Louisiana when we moved there, found it a good place to live and write, and I thought people from all over the country might like to come down there, too. I had the support of a forward-thinking president of the university who liked the idea and offered the necessary financial support. My goals might sound a bit silly. But I'll say a little. They were like the goals of any other believer. Art is my religion—not just literature but all of art. It's the most important thing in life for it connects us all one to another—it is the one most eternal link between human beings—us and the past, us and those of different cultures, us and those of different religions or no religions, us and those of different sexual tastes, us and those of different passions, us and the future. The preachers, the politicians, the corporate executives—they've all let us down. I think art and artists can do more for humanity than all of them. And I think that's enough about my goals, other than to say my years at McNeese were a wonderful and happy experience.

FP: Initially, I enrolled in an MFA program because I wanted time to read and write more poetry, while surrounded by others who felt the same passion for the art. Is community the best thing about an MFA program?

JW: Honestly, I don't think it is. It has become something of a cliché to speak of the importance of a community of writers. A community of like-minded individuals with similar interests is obviously a pleasure, but it is primarily good for socializing—for conversation, parties, sex, that kind of thing. The best thing a student can get from an MFA program is something else. First of all, if the student doesn't already have it, then a real devotion, a true reverence, for the art has to be instilled—the kind of reverence that puts one's art over one's ego, over socializing, over conversation, parties, even sex. And much of that is based on a devotion to constant reading, to knowing the whole history of one's art. Too many students think they can become great writers without being great readers. It is simply impossible. And it's equally impossible to become a great writer by only reading contemporary literature, the majority of which is, as is the case in any time period, mediocre. And then equally important to cultivating the devotion to art, the best thing about an MFA program is acquiring a solid knowledge of the fundamentals of the craft. And the student gets that from a professor who knows the craft and is dedicated enough to the art of writing to have no fear in telling a student when something is bad, why it's bad, and how to make it better. And there should also be no fear in telling the graduate student the truth when she or he has done something really wonderful. Serious praise is as valuable as serious criticism. Some MFA programs, unfortunately, are dominated by cultural nihilists who think terms like "good" and "bad" are not objective aesthetic judgments. I have written at length on this subject and won't go over it all again. But it is a professor's

duty to tell a student, especially an art student, when his or her art is bad and when it's good. And if it's bad, it's the professor's job not simply to say it's bad but to convincingly show the student how to improve it—to make a more effective metaphor, a more musical line (or less musical, as the case may be), and so forth. In other words, it's the professor's duty to show the student the craft—and then to let the craft itself convince the student. If a student's first devotion is to the art itself and not to his or her own ego, a better line is always convincing. And that's the most valuable thing that can come from an MFA program—learning the craft and becoming humbled by the art.

And on the subject of speaking honestly with students, I think the most damning thing that can be said about any attempted work of art is "so what," which is the same thing as saying "it's boring." The harshest criticism I used to give my poets in the graduate workshop was "your poem didn't make me care. The words didn't make me give a damn" about what was happening to you, the character in it, or whatever you were describing. Keith Carter, one of the finest contemporary photographers I know, said, and I quote it in a book on his work: "I demand opera in pictures. I want to be lifted up. I want to be elevated. I want to weep a little bit. I want to care. I want to clasp my hands. I want to be dropped down, and I want to walk away feeling like I had a human experience. I demand that from art." A human experience is what art must give us—that is the connecting thread, that is what makes us want to come back to it to re-see it. And any work of art that does not DEMAND that we return to it—that does not insist that it cannot be heard with only one listening, seen with one viewing, appreciated with one reading—is finally insignificant, disposable, and bad.

FP: Hurricane Rita hit Lake Charles just a few years ago. As director of a creative writing program at the time, what changes, if any, did you witness in the writing life of your students and in your own? In your own experience, does good poetry come any more readily from tragedy than from other life events?

JW: Rita had a serious effect on my life and caused me to retire and move to Vermont a few years sooner than I'd planned on doing, but it had no effect on my writing, except for a single poem, and I couldn't tell that it had any effect on my students' work. As for where good poetry comes from—it comes from everywhere and from anything. From my reading of literature, I can't see that tragedy has made for any better art than joy has.

FP: Now that you've retired, in what ways do you feel satisfied, and in what ways do you feel driven to continue your work?

JW: I miss students like crazy. I was in a classroom every semester of my life between 1968 and 2006 but for a single semester when I took a sabbatical, and I did that only because I had to travel a great deal for the sake of a project I was working on. I no longer have that enjoyable weekly contact with my students, but I'm still in fairly constant contact with many of them—and about writing and reading. But I do miss the classroom environment and its stimulation. What could be more fun in life than reading books together with bright young people and talking together about them? Of course, I do accept a few reading and lecture invitations each year, and that puts me back in the classroom to some extent. And the rest of my work goes on as it always has. I'm always working on some critical project, am always editing something else, always have essays I've been asked to write, and the poems happen when they happen. So all is well

about the writing, and the reading is better than ever. I always reread every book I taught in order to be fresh on it, and so I was always behind in my personal reading. Now I have time to read things I've wanted to but just not had the time to get around to. And I've made great discoveries that I'd be teaching were I still teaching. Things like Mary Webb's *Precious Bane*, simply one of the best and certainly one of the most poetic novels I've ever read; Pamela Frankau's great novel, *The Willow Cabin*; and the novels of Storm Jameson, one of the most underrated of British female novelists. She wrote a lot, disparaged a good bit of it, but of the ten or so of her novels I've now read, three are just brilliant and only two have been weak. The great ones were *Women Against Men*, *The Hidden River*, and *The Early Life of Stephen Hind*. I love 20th century female British novelists and tend to think they were the great novelists of the past century. Von Arnim, Mitford, Pym, Comyns, Taylor are such wonders. I'd not read all of Elizabeth Taylor, so I've been completing her novels. Another great discovery for me was Mollie Panter-Downes' astounding novel *One Fine Day*—like *Ulysses* it all takes place in a single day and a good bit of it is interior. I'd never even heard of her—and God, it's a great book. So the reading has been a real joy. I've also finally gotten around to reading Patrick Hamilton, who is astoundingly good. Had I known *Hangover Square* I would have taught it in my Modern Novel course right alongside Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera*. *Vera* has the most brilliant characterization I know of a horrible, horrible bastard who is absolutely destructive to his wife, and *Hangover Square* has the worst bitch I can recall in the 20th century novel. So together they make a great rotten couple—and the characterizations are just so perfectly done. Writing students can learn a great deal from both novels. And let me plug one other book, By George, Wesley Stace's new novel. It's beautiful and deeply moving. The conclusion brought me to tears like the conclusion of *Bel Canto* or *Possession*, a conclusion that is both aesthetically perfect but wildly surprising, too—and Stace stretches the amazing concluding material, which is not just one fact but a collection of equally important facts, out over 40 pages. The book deals with a ventriloquist's dummy, and much of it is in the dummy's voice. Who could ever believe that so artificial an artifice could be turned to great art? But Stace does it. There are surprises here that are as surprising as some of those in *Fingersmith*, but these are all primarily emotional surprises, not just plot twists. Were I still teaching, I'd be teaching it right now.

FP: You have a new book of photo poems, *Endurance and Suffering: Narratives of Disease in the 19th Century*. Can you tell us a little bit about how this project came about? How did you come across the photo archive and Dr. George Henry Fox's medical notes?

JW: I wouldn't really call them photo poems. A photograph does accompany each poem and each poem is inspired by that particular photograph, but they are really just a collection of narratives about those individuals. As a photographic historian, I'd known of Fox's work and the accompanying photographs he had made by O. G. Mason, a great 19th century American photographer. Fox was one of the first physicians to illustrate his books with photography, but the books themselves are rare, and one is particularly rare and extremely difficult to find. It's the kind of thing libraries that have won't loan, so finally I just had to locate a copy and buy it. But back before I became interested in the people in the case studies and photographs, I really couldn't stand to look at the pictures. Two of them, however, did haunt me—a girl with elephantiasis and a man with syphilis who has his hand on his forehead in a look of desperation. I'd find myself thinking about them or sometimes going back to look at reproductions of

them just as I might go back to look at any other great visual image. And eventually a poem began to shape itself about her, about what it could have been like to have lived in her body, a body which I eventually began to see as beautiful and as that of the eternal woman. Then a similar process leading to a poem happened about the man. Then one about a little boy with leprosy. Eventually over time I knew all these people and I began to imagine their lives. As I say in the Introduction, all of the poems are certainly not about the nobility of suffering. Some are filled with hatred and cruelty because suffering just as often brings out the worst in us as it does the best. The photographs and poems, by the way, can be seen and read online at the Art and Medicine website, www.artandmedicine.com.

FP: I know you had trouble publishing this book in the United States. In fact, you've published it through a German publisher. Do you have any theories about why this was so? What sort of responses did you get from the U.S. publishers?

JW: U.S. publishers ran from it. My books of poetry have sold well and so have my critical books on photography, but no American publisher would touch this book, with the exception of 21st Editions, but I declined the publisher's kind offer because I'm the editor of that press, and it didn't seem right. Two American publishing houses well-known for the strong sexual and violent content of their books turned it down. One said it was "too hard-edged for our readership," and the other returned it with no comment, even though the book was hand-delivered to the publisher by Joel-Peter Witkin, whom I've worked with on several books and who had worked with that press. It is as if we may offend against anything except our society's stereotypical notions of beauty. A lot of people might look at the pictures and call them ugly. I would have once, too. But today the beauty we are led to comes primarily from the look of movie stars and our extremely ugly popular culture. That last chapter of Umberto Eco's *History of Beauty* is about "The Beauty of the Media," the last section of which is frighteningly entitled "The Beauty of Consumption." And we are probably the worst. I think ours is the most narrow and most restricted sense of beauty—of what makes a beautiful face or a beautiful body—in the world today. Those who most mistrust and fear individuality are those who most want to look just like everyone else.

FP: In *Endurance and Suffering*, your allusions to Job, of course, recall the idea of God turning away from man. Neighbors and loved ones may have turned away from the subjects of your poems through ridicule or disgust. But your poems, with their loving gestures and humanizing touch, dare us to look at these real people, and to know them by name in some cases. The tenderness with which you write of their trials, desires, beauty, sexuality—their humanity—is breathtaking. Can you talk a little about your now intimate relationship with the photos' subjects and what kept you from simply turning away?

JW: Thank you so very much for saying that. That, of course, is the response I'd love for everyone to have—and maybe others will, but the publishers certainly didn't, except for Edition Galerie Vevais, a great award-winning German publisher of art books and poetry. Alexander Scholz, the publisher, also saw the beauty in the images. As I said earlier, at first the pictures put me off, but they continued to haunt me, and finally I think I came to see through what was superficial about them and about those people. None of them could have had easy lives—especially the girl with elephantiasis. We look at her distorted body and might at first want to turn away, but after looking at her and thinking about her for months and months, I

realized that she really was beautiful, that she was a part of the eternal woman. She is, as I say in the poem, “mother, lover, daughter,” and we should not turn away but embrace her. Finally she’s even more—she’s Gaia, the living, breathing planet, Earth Mother, Earth Wife, and Earth Daughter, and if we look more deeply into others, even those who might repel us because of the way they look—or vote, or have sex, or pray or not pray—we might see similar miraculous transformations. And I hope those kinds of transformations are also part of what this book is about.

FP: The medical artist, Dr. Joseph Gaertner, who hand-painted the photographs, colors the mouth of cornua cutanea patient, presumably for medical purposes, but also the startling blue eyes. Do you have any ideas as to why this was done?

JW: The photograph is from 1879, and we didn’t have real color photography until 1904—actually 1907 when the autochrome process went on sale. As early as the 1840s, daguerreotypists often hand-colored their little metal photographs to make them seem more life-like and true to nature. And I think that was what Gaertner was after—especially in a clinical work like this, which was circulated only to physicians. To us today, as you obviously see, it can be a striking, jarring, and in the case you mentioned, horrific effect.

FP: In addition to winning two Iowa Poetry Prizes, you’ve had a productive life as photo historian, editor, and curator. And like Blake and his music/printing/poetry, the two lifestyles for you are not mutually exclusive. *Endurance and Suffering* is one example of this. How do the two arts serve each other in your creative life, or are they a single art in your mind?

JW: It’s all one single activity. Camille Paglia, one of the few honestly great critics of our time, said something I love. She wrote, and I’ve forgotten where, “There is no true expertise in the humanities without knowing all the humanities. Art is a vast, ancient interconnected web.” Of course, it’s hard to know it all—impossible, in fact—but if art is our life, that’s what we ought to be trying to do. It’s also the only thing that really might make us love one another.