

An Interview by Taffy Martin with Diane Wakoski

Diane Wakoski was Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Emory University during the Spring, 1981, quarter. When we sat down on a May afternoon for tea and conversation, we discussed her recent and forthcoming work, the direction in which her poetry has been evolving, and her fellow New American Poets. Wakoski's manner is direct and her personality engaging. Behind large, thick glasses, she hardly looks, in spite of her now entirely grey hair, like a woman who is, as she puts it, well on into middle age. As we spoke, I was impressed by the musical cadences of her sentences and by the difference between the angry face ironically depicted behind a gun in a fourteen-year-old book jacket photograph and the pensive woman who spoke with me that afternoon. Wakoski's poetry has traditionally been intensely concerned with outward appearances and the search for physical and material comfort. But her more recent work examines and interprets rather than merely expresses such concerns. In the interview below, we discuss those developments and changes.

Having been at various times associated with the New York School of Poets, the poetry of the Deep Image, and West Coast poetry, Wakoski is presently Professor of Creative Writing at Michigan State University. In 1980 she published both *Cap of Darkness*, her latest collection of poetry, and *Toward a New Poetry*, her first collection of essays. The new poems develop the themes, obsessions, and characters of her earlier collections, but their rhythm and tone is different. I had asked whether those changes and the decision to collect her essays reflected the influence of her participation in academia. "Well, I don't know," she answered. "I mean, the academic world—that term, which was the greatest pejorative that you could put on a person in the fifties, and which was one of the things that made me sure that I didn't want to live my life in the academic world, is still a pejorative, but what constitutes an academic poet keeps changing in a way." After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1960, Wakoski moved to New York. Since 1967 she had been earning her living by

giving poetry readings on college campuses, but she explained that “that itinerant life, even if you can get enough work, is extremely exhausting and debilitating, and ultimately very hard to sustain.” We began the interview by looking at Wakoski’s new work and considering what it reveals about developments in her creative method.

May 11, 1981

TM: *Cap of Darkness*, which appeared just a few weeks after your first collection of essays, *Toward a New Poetry*, differs from your previous volumes of poetry in being more meditative. It seems to use as metaphor many of the characters you’ve previously created. I noticed that in some poems, especially toward the end of the collection, such as “Lantana” and ...

DW: “My Mother’s Milkman.” Yes, I’ve gotten more and more interested in how memory functions as a kind of narrative for people. And that memory is not documentary, as most people seem to think it is, even at its best. Its best function is over a long period of time, in the sense that you don’t need to remember what happened a minute ago, because you’re in touch with that. What you need to remember is what happened a long time ago. So memory is really most valuable in the sense of its function—its primary function. We’re not talking now about senility and other things—not remembering that you poured this cup of tea and pouring it again. But the use of memory as part of your life, a sense of your life, and knowing your life, and building on and creating a whole out of that. Every year that you remember something, you either lose part of it, and therefore it becomes a different kind of memory because it’s more fragmentary, or as you’re losing it you replace it with something else so it may remain the same size, but it actually changes. And every time you *tell* your memory, just as every time you *tell* a dream, if you’re the kind of narrator that doesn’t like gaps, you invent something that you think is logical, that fits in an empty space, and therefore distort or change it—not really distort—

TM: Create?

DW: Create it. And if you’re the kind of person that doesn’t feel required to do that, you just let the fragments hang there. So whatever you’re doing, you’re recreating not history, but your sense of yourself. Because your memory is part of your whole self. That’s what began to

fascinate me about these fragmentary memories that I had that really had no narrative meaning in *my* life whatsoever, such as the image of my mother's milkman. There are many memories that I have that have huge narrative significance. And most of them I have by now mined and made poetry out of—the memory of a scene. My mother opened her trunk on the porch that day when my father, who wasn't expected, who was in the Navy, came walking home through those palm trees in the sunset. This is a memory that is a key to all my feelings about myself as a woman, about myself as a person, about my father, about men in the world. So that's a loaded memory, and it's full of narrative content. I very early, so to speak, in my poetic life, wrote a poem using that. To be truthful, I've mined all of those memories from my childhood that have that kind of narrative significance, because I was writing poetry for over twenty years. I've spent my capital in the sense of using those memories, and I began to realize that I had these other subsidiary memories that were more fragmentary and not part of the narrative of my life.

TM: How did they affect your poetry?

DW: I realized that fragment is simply a way of narrative. My mother's milkman really didn't mean anything to me. He was simply a figure who came—and because I wasn't that interested in mother's life, it didn't really even interest me that there was this kind of romantic figure in her life and, you know, that sense of proportion, reality. Nothing every happened that was significant other than this one scene that was sort of charged. But I never even really realized why it was charged, because I didn't—I know what homosexuality was in those days and so I didn't understand—I mean, I understood that there was something weird about this man leaving his wife and daughters to live with this teenage boy, but I didn't really understand why, even though I had read Freud and had discovered Havelock Ellis and things. I didn't know what half this stuff was really about in emotional terms. I really just didn't know. The things you get from reading are different from what you get from the life input that goes into that reading. And so when I kept thinking of this phrase, "my mother's milkman," it kept coming back so much that I actually even wrote it down in my notebook that I write my poems in, which I don't keep as a journal or anything like that, but I just wrote down the words thinking that I was going to write a poem. But then nothing came, and a month later the phrase came back to me again—"my mother's milkman." So I realized, and probably it was the phrase "mother's milk"—I wasn't a breast-fed baby—and actually the idea of breast-feeding is very repellent to me,

although I grew up drinking a quart of milk a day. I don't know what kind of craziness that is. But whatever it is, it must have been that phrase. And then there was this figure. And, of course, what the poem did—sometimes it reveals the archetypal thinking that is going on that you don't know about. I realized that I was thinking of my mother's milkman in terms of my own narrative history. That's what allowed me to write the poem. But it was new narrative history, because I suddenly recognized him as figure like the King of Spain, functioning for my mother the way the King of Spain functioned for me. But I hadn't invented the King of Spain until a few years before, so it was impossible to fit it into that niche.

TM: Into the mythology.

DW: Into the mythology. And I also, perhaps because of my bad feelings about my mother and the subsequent feelings about myself, I was looking for the differences between my mother and myself, and not the similarities. And I did not start this poem thinking, "My mother's milkman is her King of Spain." I don't know that that was even in the first version of the poem. It was in the revision, that "My mother's milkman, her King of Spain." That phrase suddenly occurred, and I saw what I was doing. So you see, what really became the primary image to me is this very fragmentary image from childhood of this man, the sound image of that truck, and the milk bottles and the image of his gold tooth which I realized then that he had had but, I somehow hadn't even thought of that. And fitting in with the King of Spain and then fitting in with my own obsession of the last few years of men leaving women for other men. And, you know, a final recognition that in some way, even though my father, who hated homosexuals like poison in the best redneck fashion, really chose the homosexual way of life rather than live with my mother and his two daughters. He chose to live on that ship with all those men, just as Cloyce Hamilton. But these discoveries are all of what I consider a more meditative nature. And they're with the subsidiary, the fringes of things, rather than that primary, that primal, charismatic image.

TM: I was also surprised to find in *Cap of Darkness* a change in the image you present of yourself. In a lot of earlier poems you play with being pale, moonfaced, unattractive and yet also alluringly beautiful. "Lantana" presents a different type, an ambivalent memory of yourself as a child possessing murderous stillness. It is a description of your inner self rather than one of outward appearances.

DW: Well, that's another one of those poems that comes out of an interest in how memory works. There's a constant visual image I have of this little girl standing in front of the hedge. There's no narrative connected with it. I can feed it into my myth, but it doesn't have any important narrative place in the myth. And there's nothing really connected with it except what I, as someone years later, come back and superimpose upon it. And it really is one of those favorite photographic memories. And in fact I've used the image in various ways in poems, but, you know, just as a subsidiary image itself. But I suddenly realized that in constantly recalling—this is why I dedicated that poem to Lore Metzger when I read it—because it was talking to Lore that made me realize that I was having, that I brought that image into a conversation and realized that I really wanted to talk about it, it was coming back to me. The effect of that poem I think is very similar—a lot of people don't like that poem, and other people think it's very strong—and it's very similar to a poem in *The Man Who Shook Hands* that is, I think, the last poem in the book. And it's part of that little group of poems called "The ring" along with "The hitchhikers." "The Photos" is the title of it. I'm driving in California and the incident of my sister showing the photograph of my father to my mother . . .

TM: And looking in the mirror.

DW: Right. And then ending with the image of myself as Medea and an image of myself, again, as a murderer.

TM: That's true. It is there.

DW: The image of the murderer. And the last line, which lots of people—it just really bothers them. This is an American disease—you have to be happy. But the line is some—I wish I could remember it—we can look it up—but it's "How I hate myself" or "How I hate my life."

TM: It's "my destiny."

DW: "My destiny." But it's the same thing. And people think you need to go rushing off to a psychiatrist the minute you can say that. To me that's an enormously strong thing to be able to say. It took me forty years to be able to say that. How I hate my mother; how I hate myself. I kept trying to say "How I hate my mother; I will be different; I am

more beautiful." And, you know, it's never going to be a major—I mean I'm not going to write a whole book of poems about it.

TM: Yes, you've talked about this before. I think that one of the strengths of your poetry is your attempt to acknowledge and build something out of the pain that the poems recreate. Responding to rejection is the basis of a whole lot of your poetry. It uses the pain to create something new.

DW: It's a source of strength in me. Being able to say "How I hate my life" is for me a very strong statement, not a statement of weakness or a statement of giving up.

TM: Or failure?

DW: Or failure. It's an absolute acceptance of an imperfect world, that I keep trying to make whole and perfect in my poems.

TM: Yes, I've often thought that your attempt to create a private mythology succeeds because it starts, as Yeats knew it must, at the bottom of the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, having given up all the pretensions and creations, having come face to face with the starting place.

DW: Well, that's what *Greed: Part Twelve* is all about. But I think it's so overtly about it, that it will bother some people. It doesn't bother me. I've loved it. I've had a wonderful time learning it.

TM: There is a section missing from your long poem, *Greed*. What has happened to that poem?

DW: I finished *Greed: Part Twelve* a couple of weeks ago. Eleven was published. The missing one is *Greed: Part Ten*, and that was supposed to be the greed of love, sex, and romance, and it was supposed to be the BIG greed. And it was going to be part prose and part poetry and the prose was going to be letters and it was based on—I conceived of it at a time when I really was writing poems often in conjunction with writing letters to people, especially to men that I was involved with when I was living alone. And somehow the act of writing a letter would often inspire me to write a poem. I even got so I would just write a poem as part of the text of the letter and without feeling any need to revise it or anything, just send it that way. And partly because I was doing that, I started xeroxing those letters, not really with the idea

of saving them, or I started making carbon copies, and then I realized that I was interested in the letters as poems and I thought the whole subject of love, sex, and romance was something I talked so much about that that would just make organically the right kind of work. So over a period of a couple of years I must have collected about two or three hundred pages of this stuff, and I had it all xeroxed when I was at Hollins College and then I continued to write some more letters and poems of various relationships, interrupted this or added to it, and then I decided I was going to start right for sure and I realized that I had all kinds of problems that I didn't know how to solve. They were fiction-writing problems, among other things: were the characters in this book going to be the names of the men, or was I going to make up names? If I made up names—I had already decided that I'd probably edit the letters so that they weren't full of things like "I'll be arriving in Los Angeles on so-and-so" and all those informational details, but then I decided that if I took out those parts, in a way the narrative would be missing because part of what was interesting about those letters was they're real letters. And, so I kept going back and forth—what am I going to do? I had already started calling all these people by names, by designations: the motorcycle-betrayer, the cowboy, the this, the that, and I liked that, but on the other hand, I felt that even if they had those identities in the poems, they still had to have real names: so it would still be "Dear Gary" or "Dear John" or "Dear Bob," or whatever. These problems just became overwhelming to me. I realized that I couldn't decide what I wanted to do. Then at a certain point I decided that I wanted to . . . I mean, I would go through and in a few weeks I decided I wanted to make the whole thing fictional, a real epistolary novel instead of a poem.

TM: But it never became that novel?

DW: To be truthful, I didn't totally want to solve that problem, because I still wanted to be writing my poems and being me. I didn't really want to write a novel. By that time I'd started siphoning the poems off because whenever I'd put together a collection of poems, and this was during the period of time when I was publishing about a book a year, I obviously would use all the poems I was writing, or some of the poems I was writing. And then I got to thinking, well, if all these poems have been published, then the only thing I'm publishing that's new is the letters, and there's something really bizarre about publishing your own letters as a poem. It's not unreasonable, but it's—I just decided that it all began to have too many problems, so it became . . . By that time I decided to write *Greed*: Part Eleven.

TM: And that established *Greed: Part Ten*?

DW: So we published Eight, Nine, and Eleven together, and ever since poor librarians have been saying, "Where's number Ten?" And, probably, in order just to neaten things up, I should have written this next part of *Greed* as Part Ten and just forgotten about it, but as far as I'm concerned Part Ten is love, sex and romance, and it's the lost part. It's not lost—all this stuff is in my archive at the University of Arizona library, so if it never even gets published, it has some kind of existence, some kind of public existence for people who are interested in getting access to it.

TM: And Part Twelve?

DW: When I started about two and a half or three years ago I decided I was going to write *Greed: Part Twelve* and it was going to be about gluttony, maybe. Because that's the obvious aspect of greed, but it was the one I had never written about. And it was obviously becoming a major factor in my life, as I became more and more interested in eating and food became a primary subject in my life. Overeating was the natural result of this. But when I started writing *Greed: Part Twelve*, I found that I wasn't interested in gluttony at all. That's why I had never written about it. It just didn't interest me. And I didn't feel moralistic or anything else about it; I just wasn't interested in it. I didn't think that any appropriate poem about gluttony should really be a poem about food, because that isn't what my subject was. And I think that's part of what slowed me down for a long, long time. I realized this after I wrote the first two or three pages of it. Then, I think, I let about a year go by, and I picked it up again, and as I was writing, I realized that what I wanted to write about was my idea of bourgeois greed, and that is of always wanting to have enough of everything, which is *not* gluttony—it's the opposite of what many people think of as greed. But I think of it as what real bourgeois decadence is—that you should never be wanting for anything. Not that you should have lavish and large surpluses, but that you should always have enough to eat, you should always have enough sex, you should always have a nice house, you should always have transportation. And I realize that that's the kind of greed that my students most suffer from, and it most debilitates their lives because it makes them incapable of taking risks and of living their lives, you know, without being kind of plugged into this "enough" system.

TM: What about recognition, or fame? Enough of that?

DW: Oh yes. Although for me that's probably more of a greed. I want lots of that. I don't want just enough; I mean I spend every year in the spring anguishing over not being nominated for all the major prizes or not getting them, and there's no reason in the world why anyone should want a Pulitzer Prize if what you care about is good writing, because that's not what gets Pulitzer prizes. And actually that's one of the things that this *Greed* is about—the folly of worldly recognition, and the folly of that sense of always having enough because there can never be enough.

TM: Now that's come up in *Greed* before.

DW: I think that's the basic concept of *Greed*, really. I just keep mulling it around different subject areas. What really—last summer I really took off and realized what I was going to do, and it's really the other half—I didn't realize this until I was finished—but it's the other half of *Greed*: Part Ten—love, sex and romance, the quest for the perfect partner in order to create a whole self. And I conceived of the poem as being a journey to the desert where I meet all of my muses—George Washington, the King of Spain, the Woodsman, the Motorcycle-Betrayer, they're all there—Beethoven. I started writing that part of *Greed* last summer, I got it written to the point where I took the journey and I got there, and then I didn't know what to do. It lay around for six months or so until we got moved into our new house and I decided I was ready for a new project. It had been germinating and things were sprouting, and so I started working on it either in January or February for several hours each day, three or four days a week. Then I would go for a couple of weeks and not do anything—it just kept sprouting. I decided I wanted to write a masque, because I like allegory, and I've always been fascinated by drama, but for the same reason that I don't write novels—I can't create realistic characters, I like extravagant things too much—I decided a masque would be perfect, because it's an allegory, and it's done in the most extravagant of all possible ways. I had already invented the context for this. I arrived in the desert with the sense that I was on a journey of destiny—a journey of some sort. I arrived at this place in the middle of the desert that was a kind of oasis—with incredible gardens and these glass structures. And I immediately saw a sign as I walked into one of these gardens that said: "G. Washington, President, Society for Western Flowers." So that became the setting for what was going on, and I meet George Washington.

TM: Was that the first meeting with George? I don't remember.

DW: The first *real* meeting. So George tells me that I'm—asks me what I've been doing, and asks me to define what my quest has been, and he says that I'm here to learn about my new quest. So what it is is the end of the search for the perfect man or mate or wholeness through sex or man's love other than self.

TM: And you become Yeats, altering Plato's parable.

DW: Right. I'm a mythmaker in the sense that I don't tell the story of my life but of something bigger than life. I see myself as "woman," and I definitely see myself as "poet," almost in epic terms, rather than . . . I *use* autobiography, but I really don't write autobiographically. I'm just not enough involved in the real world. I always want things to be bigger than life.

TM: It seems to me that the closest I've come to that is Olson, or maybe Williams, as being at the center.

DW: I identify with that same big ego, the Maximus ego, that's in those poems, and that same sense of wanting to define the world in your own solipsistic mythology in a way, with yourself somewhere at the center of things. I'm not realistically egotistical in the sense that I don't really think Diane Wakoski is a very important person. In fact, I'm terribly aware of how insignificant Diane Wakoski is. But I think Diane the poet is the center of the universe, and I have no qualms in putting her there, running things. And this poem really does it.

TM: You seem also to manipulate various memories and experiences in a manner that reminds me, in fact, of Yeats' use of Maude Gonne. You seem to have several Maude Gones.

DW: Well he had several, too. Helen, . . .

TM: Right. But I wonder how you feel about Yeats and who you feel are your fathers and mothers?

DW: I do have lots of fathers and mothers. I guess being an orphan, which is what I've always thought of myself as being since I hated my real parents, I fantasized—I read every childhood book about orphans and the wonderful fantasy lives of *The Secret Room* and *The Secret Garden*, all of those. Yeats was a very, very, very, very, very important poet for me when I was in college. I believe it was Yeats who basically taught me the concept of creating personal mythology. When I learned

about his creation of the idea of the gyre and when I realized how he used Helen as a figure of a living woman that he loved, and not in a neoclassical sense at all, and when I realized how real people in his life like Maude Gonne took on this serial quality, the going from poem to poem, that allowed them to function in the way that Zeus and other classical figures have, that's what made me realize that you took your own life. You didn't take your own life and say it's like Isis and Osiris, the roles you need. And I think the other thing is that I began to realize that it was . . . that your autobiography was the only thing that you really had to work with, because that's your history. As soon as you removed yourself from personal history, you started doing what I consider academic poetry, that is, writing out of books instead of your life and using somebody else's heroes and heroines.

And also I quickly got a prejudice against neoclassical writing. I felt that if you were going to use the god figures of a culture, they should be from your own culture. Which is not to say I didn't greatly love Greek mythology, but I just felt the dishonesty, the enormous dishonesty of co-opting these figures that were for me out of books. They didn't exist in that world out there as they did for the Greeks. They were from books. And I would no more have written about those Greek characters than I would have written about characters in a book. Every once in a while I would yield to that temptation to make a Hamlet reference, or have one poem called "The Oedipus Within," but I always, even in my college days, had serious reservations about doing that. It just didn't seem right to me; it didn't seem to be the use of the imagination that was correct. It was using some other author's characters, and while it can be fun and amusing in certain ways, it's still too easy. And so it's Yeats, even though my prosody as such would shock Yeats. I would be worse than racketeers if T. S. Eliot sounds like a racketeer to him, and Eliot is so mellifluously in blank verse at least half the time that my poetry would, I mean, just be total chaos. And yet all I feel is that I have rescued the rhythms of my time and place and culture as he has, and that I come from a very diverse linguistic culture. That's why the American language is rough and plain—because it's not English. It's fed into by so many other sources. And so I don't think very many people would recognize Yeats as my grandfather but he was in one sense a very, very true . . .

TM: Presence? He is always there for me when I read your work.

DW: Well, I'm happy if it's there for you. Again, people pick look-alikes as relatives for you, and so I'm frequently referred to as one of William Carlos Williams' daughters; and yet to be truthful it's taken

me many years to understand the greatness of Williams' poetry. It was not an early influence on my poetry—I found it difficult to read; I didn't understand what was the greatness of that poetry, or even why it was poetry. In any case, I began to absorb that slowly, because I accepted on faith that it was great. Don't ask me why. The skeptic who will question a lot of things didn't question that. But it was Yeats and Wallace Stevens and Lorca in translation that were for me the models when I was in college trying to find a self, a voice, a something, make a transition from . . .

TM: Stevens said a life of the mind.

DW: And most people, again, don't recognize the Stevens in me at all, because I don't have any desire to use—I don't write abstractly. Although there are elements of abstraction in my poetry, people can discount them very easily because there will be only a few lines here or there and they don't feel required to work through it.

TM: You've always had a number of abstract images, but the proportion seems to be changing.

DW: That's what attracted me to Stevens. I did not like Stevens's late poetry. As far as I was concerned, *Harmonium* was the great book. And aside from *Ideas of Order*, I think all my favorite Stevens poems are there, and I see myself doing many of the things in my poetry now that I most disliked about Stevens when I was young and still don't find most attractive. But I can't help it. I think that Stevens in his late poetry sacrificed drama for a really dense rhetoric, and it was the drama that I loved in the early poems that came through imagery. The dense rhetoric was there, but it was still very—the patterns were very observable, and it gets almost clotted in the later poetry. Now I feel the same kinds of changes are taking place in my poetry, and I can't help it, and maybe that's a result of being in the academic world. Certainly Stevens was not in the academic world, and very much—didn't despise it, but . . .

TM: Kept his distance?

DW: —and definitely didn't want to be part of it.

TM: Although he did keep that distance from academia, Stevens wrote what I think is one of the best essays ever published on Marianne Moore. There's something exciting about poets writing about other

writers. You've been doing some of that yourself, and I wonder where you think it's taking you. Does it mean that you are becoming an academic poet?

DW: Well I'm definitely crystallizing my sense of who the New American poets are, and beginning to crystallize my sense of how they function in the poetry world as a whole. I used to be very careful about my perspective and keep saying to myself: "Now remember, Diane, just because these are the most important people to you doesn't mean they're the most important people in the world." I've either lost that caution with middle age, or I still have it but have been convinced that *the* academic critics—I don't include you in that, by the way—*the* academic critics who are basically the inheritors of the New Criticism—the New Criticism carried on. . . . I think the New Critics were almost all totally wrong about everything. They were trying to perceive the most British elements of American poetry—and writing about it, and championing it and themselves, writing in that way so that a poet like Geoffrey Hill, an English poet, can say that the single most important body of poetry, aside from classics and Shakespeare, for him, is Allen Tate's poetry. But you see, Allen Tate is New Criticism. And when you point out what the New Critics say about Marianne Moore—I mean, it just fits right in. And, of course, who was one of the New Critics—Eliot, who so much hated being an American, in one sense, that he had to become an English citizen of top of everything else—not just move there, but really embrace that. He was writing the New English poetry. Yeats may have called him one of the racketeers, but that's what the New English poetry was, is. And if the contemporary English poets had built on Eliot, they might even have a much more viable body of literature today than they do right now. They sort of got lost, and they had Robert Graves and a few other eccentrics. They just got lost, and then in the sixties discovered that some American poets were doing very exciting things. But in no way could the English do that, because it's the wrong tradition for them to build on. I'm not saying that an Englishman couldn't love and get as much as any reader can get from the Maximus poems. But I don't see how an English poet could use the Maximus poems to build on. I mean, we build on funny things. But you need more than just—and maybe one eccentric poet can do that. And here's Geoffrey Hill, who's certainly one of the most interesting English poets today, writing very cantankerous, involved, dance-crazy verse that's all involved in Arthurian legend and everything British that you can think of. Being inspired by Allen Tate. To me that just sets everything clear.

TM: It's not an approach that works for poetry like yours.

DW: No. I was told recently that a fiction writer who believed in that whole New Critics' world of Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks and so forth and who had taught at Vanderbilt said, after he had heard me read, "Well, I just don't understand this new poetry that doesn't use metaphor." And I spent a year thinking about how anyone could possibly conceive of my poetry as being without metaphor, but I realized this is the debasement of the New Criticism—that the New Critics in some way got themselves so involved in the idea of an artificial language that was completely contained within the poem, that people developed a definition of metaphor that sure isn't my definition of metaphor, or yours, or that of anybody who reads poetry. I can read a poem like "The Pink Dress" or a poem like "I Have Learned to Live With My Face" which are both based on images that become the metaphor that dominates the whole poem, and that man—and I read both of those poems that night, because I remember this, because I remember thinking about how he could make that response—that man said that the poem "I Have Learned to Live with My Face" does not contain a single metaphor, even though it's based on a giant metaphor that has three layers at least: my face is me, my face is the world I live in, my face is the world I have created. My face in itself I have created. I mean, how that's not metaphor I don't know.

TM: And "The Pink Dress" is . . .

DW: And "The Pink Dress" is a violent image that carries into a metaphor. And I say, "I'm just the pink dress left on the chair the night before," whatever. I mean, how anyone—I don't care whether you're a fiction writer or not—fiction writers use metaphor—metaphor is definitely in fashion right now with critics. And yet I realized that I often think of myself as coming—I mean my textbook in college was *Understanding Poetry* by Brooks and Warren. And as much as I don't think that Robert Penn Warren is one of our great American poets because I don't think that he's an innovative writer in poetry—I think that he probably is in fiction but I don't think in poetry—my ideas of metaphor and image all come right out of that textbook. And all I've done on occasion is push them, but in those two poems I don't see that I even pushed them. And I find this utterly and completely baffling.

TM: You often speak of the New American Poetry. Who are the New American poets?

DW: For me the New American poets are—you have to start with Black Mountain, Creeley, Duncan, also. And I think that there's no way that you can discount any of these poets. I think they are major American poets, and I think they're important for every possible reason and they are the center of things. I think the beat poets, but particularly Allen Ginsberg—and I think he is the Whitman of the twentieth century—I think he is the person who really made possible a kind of personal, intense, spontaneous, lyric or re-made it possible in the way that Whitman made it possible in 1855. I can see that as very historic. I also think that some of the New York School poets—Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery are really considerable poets, particularly O'Hara for me. Again, his "Personism; A Manifesto" seems to me to really present in two little pages the ideas of the New American poetry and all their contradictions and paradoxes and at the same time all of their avant-garde and traditional reality. I think he brings that together in that little essay which is deceptively simple. And every time I read it, I see new things in it. He starts—it's so wonderful—he starts in almost as a parody of the New Critics, and says, "Well, of course, everything *is* in the poem." That's his first sentence. *But*—then he goes on. It's so wonderful. And, again, it makes me feel that the American literary scene of the thirties and forties, dominated really by Anglophilia of a very special order and that whole sense of the New Criticism, was just a means of obscuring what was already possible in American poetry, and consequently not keeping poets like Jeffers from writing originally and powerfully—or Moore or Williams or Stevens. But notice how in isolation all those people were. Jeffers over on the West coast and not caring if he ever left, Marianne Moore very public as we said but in an odd way very eccentric and private, and certainly not part of an academic establishment, for a while editing *The Dial* and helping to acknowledge some of the best of what was being written—the Stevens and so forth; and Williams, wanting to be part of a kind of literary scene, but just literally not having enough time to do it, and so again remaining in an odd kind of—not isolation, none of them were hermits, because even Jeffers was an enormously social man, and his wife just organized his social life and people came to visit them all the time. But she also totally shielded him, so he always had his work time and he never had to leave home. He hated leaving home. And I guess when they were both in their forties, she decided that she deserved a treat after all these years of raising their children and fending everybody off, and organizing things, and the money and everything, and she asked to go to Ireland. So they spent a year traipsing around Ireland, which he didn't really like very much. And Stevens sitting off in Hartford, Connecticut, or down in Key West and

being very suspicious of that world of New Critics. You know, the things that gets to me every time I think about it is, yes, the poets of today may all kind of hover around the academic world, some with relatively decent jobs, some more like vagabonds, but what I realized as I was writing about this last week, is that none of the poets I'm going to name—although many of them teach—teach in an M.F.A. program *per se*. I've named—Duncan stays away from the academic world as much as possible, although he's so erudite that when he taught his class at Black Mountain, he did not read students' poetry, and when he gives workshops now, he refuses to read student poetry. He talks about history and language and linguistics. And Creeley teaches at Buffalo, but sort of keeps respectable by not going to classes and doing other things that make him not the favorite person there. Being academically irresponsible, I don't think he likes critiquing student poetry that much.

TM: And Black Mountain?

DW: Olson, as we know, was head of Black Mountain College for a while, but was not really into that. Certainly none of those people would be caught dead teaching in an M.F.A. program. Or maybe they would be caught dead in it, I don't know. It's not where they need to go. Creeley has a Harvard education. Duncan is largely self-educated, and Olson had a Harvard education. And Ginsberg now has gravitated to academia; that is, he runs the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetry, or the Naropa Institute. And he currently teaches his students how to write saphics, because he's into saphics and Sappho, and he's very charming in his own way. In his old age, he's come to a strange kind of academicism. But again, that ain't no M.F.A. program, and he's all involved with the chanting and visiting your resident guru and following his rules for spiritual discipline and so forth. Snyder I would certainly mention as part of that world. He's not really a beat poet, but certainly coming out of that San Francisco renaissance, where the beat poetry came from. And Snyder lives with his family as part of a small community in the mountains above Sacramento, California, in the Sierras. It's a very community-oriented life, but a very private life, and not at all involved with academia except when he goes on tour to give readings to make money for himself. And I certainly would mention Kenneth Rexroth as part of that world—just a magnificent poet and innovator, certainly a writer of that New Earth poetry, the Dionysian poetry. He's lived in San Francisco all of his life. Now he teaches at Santa Barbara—or he may have just recently retired—but again, the class that he gave is almost unrespectable. His so-called writing class

was a performance class. You could come and play the trombone, it that was what you were into or do mime or whatever. This was his writing class! And in some ways, even though I didn't really approve it as a substitute for a writing class for students—because there's my little Apollonian self sitting there saying they should be reading Brooks and Warren or at least Gary Snyder—I really see what he was trying to do. He was trying to create this kind of situation that was a matrix for creativity and that allowed people to be in a creative community that wasn't just writers. It was everybody doing everything. He tried to create a little mini-world.

Unfortunately, it's almost impossible to do that. It's like trying to make utopian communities. Again, no organized M.F.A. program. And I don't really even know how Rexroth earned his living most of his life. It was not academy-oriented. I would certainly mention William Everson as part of this group of New American poets. He was a Dominican monk, and the trade that he learned was printing. And he's been very involved as a poet in printing the word. He has some nice essays in that book called *Earth Poetry*, which is essays and interviews with him. Of course, in his old age, he's come to academia, too. He teaches at Santa Cruz, but I don't know that they have an M.F.A. program.

Then John Ashbery, the New York School poet, was for years editor of *Art News* and recently took a job in the writing program, which is the only M.F.A. at Brooklyn, but hated it. And I heard last year he had taken a job with *Newsweek* magazine as their international art correspondent that paid a very huge salary and allowed him to live in Paris part of the time. But that's the world he wanted to be in, not academia. Frank O'Hara was a curator for the Museum of Modern Art and lived in the very high-paced world of painting and sculpture and visiting Fire Island, where he talked to his muse. Denise Levertov is another poet that is sometimes associated with Black Mountain, but she herself doesn't like to be. I think it's because of her ideas about organic poetry that are formally very related to the ideas of projective verse—and Levertov basically was an intellectual housewife for most of her life. She didn't really have a job, but would earn whatever she could from her writing. Then she got very, very actively involved in politics and giving readings, I think making money in connection with that. She recently took a job teaching—again, I think not in a writing program, but teaching writing at Tufts University—and I think foolishly, but admirably, quit last year when they didn't give tenure to a young person that she thought deserved it. That didn't really help her position. So she's once again out of academia, trying to earn her living from her writing and speaking. See, isn't it interesting? And you could

say, well, she just has an eccentric list of poets. But these are poets that I've chosen, not because they're not involved with academia, but because to me they are really essential *new writers*.

TM: Yes. And they differ from one another so much.

DW: I could probably continue my list of New American poets, but I think I've managed to name enough to give you a sense of what I'm talking about. People are constantly coming to me and saying, "What about so-and-so?" "What about James Dickey?" Yes, I like James Dickey. I think he's a very, very good poet. I'm not sure, again, where I feel he fits in my whole set of schemes. I know that he is somewhere in the top one hundred poets writing today. And yet I feel that I could teach James Dickey without really treating, teaching what is essential about contemporary American poetry. I could teach it in the same way that somebody could teach British poetry. And I want those poets that don't let you—I want the Frank O'Hara's, I want the Allen Ginsbergs, I want the David Ignatows who are writing in ways that people like this fiction writer from Vanderbilt can say, "But they don't even use metaphor!" Because it's not a certain kind of decorative use of that language. And James Dickey is very recognizably writing with those, as I would say, old-fashioned values. Which is not to criticize his work, it just doesn't make it the most interesting of what's being written today. Or people say to me, "What do you think about Anne Sexton?" Pretty much the same thing that I think about James Dickey: remarkable, interesting, inventive writer but who wasn't really doing something that no one else in the world seemed to be doing. And maybe I place too much emphasis on the innovative, on the new, and yet it seems to me ultimately that's what we always look back for. But I think I don't sacrifice my ideas of the new for building on a tradition. The reason that I separate Jackson MacLow off is that he's working almost in a realm that is outside of poetry because it's so involved with sound and performance that while it is poetry, it's also not building on that tradition. It is an offshoot, and it may be a different art even.

In the same way, I feel that Zukofsky over in the other direction is working so much with linguistics that he may be making an offshoot that is very, very interesting and unique and valuable, but he isn't building on that mainstream of things that we've put together and making poetry grow. And the people that I named are both innovative *and* building on a tradition *and* helping to invent the tradition as it goes along.

TM: So you don't simply call them experimental?

DW: Well I think experimental describes what Jackson MacLow and Louis Zukofsky are doing more than what I'm trying to talk about, which is why I keep looking for terms. Calling work the "New American Poetry" suggests it's the main stream. And it's not experimental in the sense that we try this, and then we throw it away, and then we try this, and we throw that away, and we try this and eventually . . .

And all those tries are interesting.

TM: And David Antin?

DW: I think of David Antin as extremely experimental and very, very—and as you know, I think *Talking at the Boundaries* is an extraordinary work. Again, I feel a little bit the way I feel about Lowell—not that their poetry is in any way the same—but there's one book there that's very, very valuable. Valuable in ways that it's hard to know how central that will be. I tend to feel that a poet has to write a long poem in order to really validate his work: in the way that Williams had to write *Paterson*, whether you think *Paterson* is his great work or not.

TM: So a long poem as a continuing project? That kind of a long poem?

DW: Well, not necessarily, because *Paterson* was not that continuing a project. I mean, it was written over a period of time, but it was written as one project. Whereas Stevens says he thinks of his work as one long, continuous poem. On the other hand, he does, at the end of his career, write several extremely long poems. And, again, I don't think they're the major part of his work, but they anchor his work in some way. And I feel that poets need that long poem to do that. And I'm always looking. I'm waiting to see if David Ignatow will do anything like this. He published his notebooks, and one gets the feeling—which I haven't read—that in some way that's his long poem, but I don't know.

TM: You mentioned once that after seeing some Kenneth Anger films you felt that you had found your spiritual brother. Is there a similarity between his ongoing explorations of myth and what appeals to you in the New American Poetry?

DW: Precisely what he does in *Scorpio Rising* and what he even more ambitiously attempts in *Lucifer Rising* which doesn't have the

charisma of *Scorpio Rising* because it doesn't have the contemporary focus like those motorcyclists. What I have always been trying to do is put the past and present together with the present as the big image. And what I've always disliked about certain poetry in the British tradition is the past is the big image. You're only allowed the little trivial kind of, "Well, that's the way I feel, too." "But Zeus was the important one." "I feel that way, too." I think Anger's motorcyclist is important. And how he goes back, maybe, into the archetype of the Dionysian figure is what's on the fringe. It's interesting because it has that archetypal depth. And *Lucifer Rising* has as its primary figures Osiris, Isis, and it also has Lucifer in a very medieval version rather than a . . . He flirts with contemporary images. But if he had, say, taken the image of a twentieth-century rock-and-roll star as Lucifer, which he—in a way he flirts with that idea because that world is kind of there—but it's not there in the primary way that those motorcyclists are there in *Scorpio Rising*. And that's why I say I found my spiritual brother in that, because in one sense I couldn't care less about motorcycles.

I care more about the past, or the passive, because I live in books, in an intellectual sense. But in the personal sense, I live in the real world, and my dream and wish is often that I'd lived in a book instead of the real world. But I also know what's wrong with that point of view. I understand that as a crippled point of view, and I accept that as crippled. And in my art, I try to make myself whole in the way that I'm crippled in real life. I truly admire the poets who do not take refuge in the academic world, and I only defend myself by saying, "Well, I'm a guerrilla fighter; I'm in there fighting the real battle." And it's true, I am. But it also *is* a place where I take refuge, because it is a place where books are more important. And the past and the tradition are more important than the real world. And I do believe in that real world. And I believe in it enough to want to live my life in some way so that I have a sense of perspective. I know how crippled I am. And I know how the academy protects that crippled side of me. And in my poetry I try to become that whole person. Thus, I feel most contempt for the academic who doesn't know he's crippled, and tries to pretend that's the real world.

TM: Once again that's your acceptance of an imperfect world.

DW: And sometimes I over-rationalize. I trust what I feel within the definition of what I am, completely. But I also trust that there's a bigger definition of reality, and I keep trying to acknowledge that. And I want that primary to always be there. I think that's what makes great

art. And I think the secondary reality is intellectualization, the making of philosophy, the involved use of language, and the meditation on this primary reality itself. And in some ways, in the same way that I've found aging to be extremely disconcerting—I really thought that I would be one of those women like Marianne Moore and Wanda Landowski, who looked exactly the same when they were twenty as when they were eighty, and who were really no different, and had a totally youthful spirit superimposed on an old, wise, spirit. And much to my surprise, I found out that I'm not that, and that I'm much more involved in the body than I thought I was, and the losing of the body is more confusing than anything. Sometimes I say I'm old, and other times I try to fight it and other times I think that's vanity.

In some way this same struggle is going on in my poems, because I'm not as interested in the motorcyclist as I was, even though I still consider that a primary image. I'm much more interested in talking about my ideas about it. And I always was, in some sense, but I always knew that you had to make that—and this is what I try to express, that you have to show and not tell—you have to create that motorcyclist before you have any right to say anything about it. I find myself receding away, just as I think Kenneth Anger is receding away from that in *Lucifer Rising*, which makes it a less good film, although certainly a brilliant film, but less good without that powerful charisma that *Scorpio Rising* has. This is the same way I felt about Wallace Stevens, and I think I still do, about his late poems as compared to poems like "Peter Quince at the Clavier" or "Sunday Morning," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Domination of Black," etc. They were moving away from those primary images into simply the consideration of those images. And maybe that's a right that all artists earn.