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Conversation With W. D. Snodgrass

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WOODS: Mr. Snodgrass, we know that you are not responsible for the comments of your reviewers, but what do you suppose Robert Lowell meant by saying that you are the poet with content?

SNODGRASS: I think he means that in my poems I'm primarily being directed to the subject of the poem and not to the style of the speaker. In other words, the reader is not being directed to notice the quality of the performance of the speaker; he is being directed to the subject I am talking about. I'm terribly delighted about one of my poems about a man in a hospital to get an autoclave and catheter tube and airbarns and other auto shops and that sort of stuff in the poem. Also I have the tendency to pack my poems with detail and to get as much detail in as I possibly can.

If I get something in a poem that has never been in a poem, some kind of hard detail, then I feel that I have made a real triumph.

WOODS: You try to restore certain areas of experience just where they belong?

SNODGRASS: Just as many as possible.

WOODS: And submerging the idea of poet as poet, the Yeats position "I now speak."

SNODGRASS: Particularly the group of poets I am with are working against people like Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, and Milton, and the whole thing in which the meaning is primarily in the quality of the speaker's voice. Whereas for me the mean-
ing very much tends to be in the details of the poem, and the objects talked about, the relationships between characters. I, at least, don't believe that when you read one of my poems you tend to notice much how the voice sounds.

WOODS: By voice do you mean stylistic devices and interplay of formal elements in the poem?

SNODGRASS: Not so much. When you listen to Dylan Thomas you're not meant to know what he is talking about.

WOODS: Hypnotic effect of his voice.

SNODGRASS: You just love that voice and you love the way it sounds and you want to hear more, regardless of what he is talking about. Milton sounds wonderful regardless of what he is talking about and his voice is very seldom imitating the thing he is talking about. His voice has a separate quality. What happens in Milton is, first of all, the meaning of his poem is God but as he himself says you can't ever say that in mortal words, you can't; the dictionary sense never adds up to God by the sort of singing quality of the voice and the musical power of it.

WOODS: "With thee conversing I forget all time."

SNODGRASS: Yes, it is meant to lift you out of time and out of this world and into God's world. This very same thing, I think, happens to Thomas and Crane who may not put it in terms of God, but put it in terms of being, in other words you get out of time.

WOODS: Some writers have attempted to define trends in writers and classify poets. Donald Hall, with some appropriate misgivings, has sorted out some categories: the Wurlitzer Wits, capable of a tour de force on a moment's notice and the school of elegance or the formalistic intellectual poets. And Shapiro, I suppose, would say he had the Eliot-ridden poets in one hand and the cosmic voices in the other. Are you conscious of being in a school of writers or any kinship with the school of writers?

SNODGRASS: Well yes, to an extent. Two minutes ago I said I was in a group of poets to which I belong. After I said it I had considerable misgivings. I didn't want to put it that way myself but I am glad that you did. All the time the people are talking about the Beatniks on one hand and the academics on the other and I think this is rather foolish. It seems to me that the good poets on either side have more in common than the bad poets on their own side and the bad poets on each
side have more in common than they have with the good poets
on each side.
WOODS: You wouldn’t feel justified in saying that you belong
to a group of poets which could be classified under any of
these categories?
SNODGRASS: Well, yes and no. I feel that a few years ago
there was a kind of group doing about the same thing. Trying
to work under a more simple surface, much more personal
poems, revolution against the whole symbolist school, Lowell
and Ann Sexton, myself, and to some extent Jim Wright.
WOODS: I was going to mention Jim Wright.
SNODGRASS: He was one of the first people doing something
else. Also, Louis Simpson. I think there was something in
common to most of the people of this group. Already we are
all going different directions. There was a while there, where
we were all doing the same thing it looked like. Lowell has
already moved into a different kind of thing. I am doing a
different kind of poem. I think Ann Sexton is still doing about
the same kind of work. You know we have already exploded;
gone off into different directions, almost all of us.
WOODS: Do you think this kind of recognition of a group is
useful or valuable at the beginning of a writing career?
SNODGRASS: Oh, yes, if you don’t make too much of it. You
know categories don’t exist. It’s the people who exist; individual
poems and if you don’t let your categories blind you, then sure
it is useful. You know when I started writing poetry I thought
I was doing something that no one else had thought of doing in
the last hundred years, anyway, and didn’t think that anyone
else was thinking of this. Then I found that other people were
doing the same thing other places, independently coming to
the same set of ideas. Plainly we were a sort of movement.
WOODS: How about Langland? Does he seem to be going off
somewhere?
SNODGRASS: I don’t know as much of his as I ought to. I’m
not really prepared. I always think of him as being terribly,
terribly, elegant.
WOODS: You were at the State University of Iowa for some
time. You’ve taught writers at Writers’ conferences and you
teach at Wayne. What value do you find for a student at writ-
er’s workshops and conferences at places like Iowa?
SNODGRASS: A great deal, certainly. When I went to Iowa,
I was there about 8 or 9 years. When I went there I knew nothing about anything. I had never heard of T. S. Eliot until I was a junior in college and I had gotten A's in all my courses at some little school somewhere. I had never understood anything that I read, never heard of Eliot, I had never heard of anything that had happened since 1850, and I thought they gave me just wonderful teaching. Couldn't have gotten anything better. Even though that was something that I had ultimately to rebel against. I had to turn and fight it, but they really gave me a real background to fight against it and I must say that working with these people who were kind of doctrinaire, new critics, and they teach this great symbolist metaphysical school. They certainly teach you to pack a line, how to load meaning into theirs—although I mean again this is something I found out ultimately to fight against, but at least they gave me something real to fight against.

WOODS: Do you think this is characteristic of a liberal education at a good school or specifically Iowa?

SNODGRASS: My impression was that it was kind of specifically Iowa—I'm not sure.

WOODS: Not so much the workshop I take it?

SNODGRASS: Not entirely, but in many ways it was the workshop. And you know we had a great parade of all the best critics and poets coming through all the time. People would either come and teach a single semester or come and give a single reading or a lecture and look at students' poems. We had some wonderful people who were there on one term or another. Also, I went out to Colorado and worked with Randell Jarrell for about three weeks and that had a tremendous effect on me. That was entirely the qualities of Jarrell that did that. If you go to a writers' conference or something like that you have to pick your teachers very carefully.

WOODS: Where would you send students now?

SNODGRASS: I don't know. It depends on where Randall Jarrell is.

WOODS: What about Roetkhe? What about the Seattle bunch?

SNODGRASS: I admire Roetkhe very much as a poet; how good he is with students I don't know but I can imagine that they wouldn't get some good out of him.

WOODS: I think he is very good, demanding in all kinds of ways, some bad and some good I suppose.
SNODGRASS: I just can't imagine that he wouldn't have some kind of good effect on them, any teacher has some bad effects, too.
WOODS: Would the general principle be better to seek out the writer rather than a particular school if possible?
SNODGRASS: I really don't know. I would guess that, though I'm really not sure.
WOODS: What about writer's conferences?
SNODGRASS: Well, the one at Colorado I thought was fine. Then I later, forgive me for saying so, taught in one that I thought was just brilliant. That was at Antioch. It was only a week long and being a week long you can't do too much. But the first year I was there I thought it was the most brilliant thing I had been connected with. Second year it wasn't as good because my students weren't as good. The quality of the students at the conference makes a tremendous difference.
WOODS: It's more of an inspirational and re-dedication than anything. It's a lot of fun too. I remember at Indiana.
SNODGRASS: It was fun and yet it was such a shattering experience—there was so much packed into that one week. The girls after their class meetings would go back to their dormitories and sit down and bawl. They were so full of tension they just had to get it off somehow. All of a sudden—that Thursday night—it was amazing—nobody told us we were going to go there—nobody said anything about it—all of a sudden we just ended up at the local tavern and started pouring down beer and singing the dirtiest songs at the top of our lungs I have ever heard. It was really wild and marvelous! All around you, you would hear people saying "My headache is going away."
WOODS: How about the poet in the university?
SNODGRASS: There are some drawbacks. I don't think it has any more drawbacks than any job you might be carrying. There are great pressures of conformity in a university. At the same time there is really more pressure for nonconformity in the university. At least nonconformity of a fairly conformist part.
WOODS: Do you find that it takes a lot of time being in the university?
SNODGRASS: No.
WOODS: Schools differ I take it?
SNODGRASS: Well I take it that they do but mine has been
pretty good to me that way. Although there are poets who have jobs, as a matter of fact, I have been offered some lately that have been much better that way. Also things are beginning to look up for people in liberal arts in the university now. They are being able to get research grants and so forth, the things that have only been open to scientists for ten or fifteen years. You really are able to get research grants, summer grants and even year long grants.

WOODS: As a writer?
SNODGRASS: Well as a writer or to do scholarly research, more of this becoming available. Certainly not as much as would be desirable but there is never as much of anything that would be desirable.

WOODS: You don't find then that teaching and the kind of critical judgments that you might make as a teacher, if that is the way you teach, is in any way destructive to writing?
SNODGRASS: I don't think so. I don't make many judgments in my teaching. I just sort of act as a referee. Unless I am teaching a writing class where I have to give an opinion. If I have a class in modern poetry. I just referee. I just go in and read a poem to them and say: "Well what do you think?" and then they start fighting.

WOODS: This is a Robert Frost approach.
SNODGRASS: Is it?
WOODS: Very present at the beginning of class and sort of faded away as the semester passes on.
SNODGRASS: Well, as a matter of fact, I am not even very present at the beginning of the class. I start right out demanding opinions from them. I admit that I am somewhat Socratic. I lead them to what I think is the meaning of the poem. They are also teaching me all sorts of things that I didn't know. My students are particularly good for that because they have no literary background, practically no pre-conception, and they are quite ignorant of literature but they are very learned in the world. They're all experience and they have a lot of new experience to bring to the poem. They often just stop me cold.

WOODS: I suppose the ideal of an instructor would be to ask questions you don't know the answer to.
SNODGRASS: Well, I often do, I don't think they realize this. I guess maybe it's a good thing. My brother often comes and sits in my class and I will talk it over with him afterwards and
find out. He'll think that I knew all along where we're going or that I understood this poem. When we got to Hart Crane in my modern poetry class I finally just steeled myself not to bone up on him and to read him as hard as I could myself and I don't understand him, I simply don't. I had to force myself to walk into class and say I don't understand this, what do you make of it? And they taught me. For my next class I knew and I have done this ever since now and I'll do mostly poems that I do know but I'm always, whoever we're doing. I will throw in a certain amount of poems that I don't know and that I want to learn about. They'll teach me every time. This just never failed.

WOODS: I suppose your response to the next subject could be drawn from what you said before about beatniks.

SNODGRASS: Beatniks?

WOODS: Is it a literary movement?

SNODGRASS: No, I don't think it is. It is a kind of organized non-rebellion. It has all the Madison Avenue characteristics, it is no wonder that it sold so well. There was a wonderful review of one of Kerouac's books in the Wall Street Journal. They gave a very reasonable statement of what the book was about and a sort of resume of what happened and then it ended up with a simple statement "and we all know that we will see them ten years in Westchester County." That was sort of it. I don't know. A pseudo-rebellion to get attention and to bring the authorities down on your neck so that you have the authorities notice and as to the actual work of the people—most of them just have no talent. That is, Ferlinghetti has some ear and I would certainly want to put outside that, Robert Duncan, who seems to me a good poet and also oddly enough he's very learned.

He's read all kinds of things and really understood them and he's done a lot of work at universities. Well, all these people are university people as far as that goes, they're trying desperately to mask it. Most of them come from Columbia. I think directly from Lionel Trilling.

WOODS: A reaction I suppose.

SNODGRASS: Yeah, sure.

WOODS: What about Ginsburg now?

SNODGRASS: He was in Trilling's class at Columbia and has written a poem to Trilling and so forth. Ginsburg, as far as I
can see, just has no talent. I have not read a great deal but I couldn’t. I really tried—you know my conscience gets me—I try hard. Well, how Rexroth could ever say Ginsburg was Whitman’s disciple . . .

WOODS: Christopher Smart’s disciple I would think.

SNODGRASS: Oh, no, his is not as good as Christopher Smart.

WOODS: No, he is not as good but he is trying.

SNODGRASS: Well, maybe I guess that’s so, yeah, nearer to Smart than Whitman. He doesn’t have any of the metrical rhythm brilliance of Whitman or of Smart either.

WOODS: He has no tact either.

SNODGRASS: No, he certainly doesn’t have that. I must say to use that much dirty language without being any more interesting than that is a real feat. I would have thought that much obscenity would produce some interest.

WOODS: What about verse plays?

SNODGRASS: What about them. I’d like to.

WOODS: Seems to be the problem of whether you’re going to write a kind of diffuse poetry or whether you’re going to have complexities the ear cannot solve.

SNODGRASS: I just don’t know. I’d love to write some verse drama, I started writing, gee, it was awful. I have been thinking of writing some more plays but I don’t think it will be in prose.

I don’t know. They’re almost historical plays and I am wondering if one could do something like Danton’s Death?, you know, that has been so brilliantly translated by Spender. That’s fairly complex and difficult poetry and yet you have the feeling that it would speak right on the stage and people, although they wouldn’t grasp all the complexities of the language, they’d sense where the language is going. I’ve never seen that done, have you?

WOODS: No. I don’t think so.

SNODGRASS: I wonder how it does on the stage.

WOODS: There aren’t many outlets on the stage.

SNODGRASS: Very few.

WOODS: What about poet’s reading their own poetry?

SNODGRASS: I do an awful lot of them and I can say that I am regarded as a performer. I think my role as a reader is quite different than my role as a writer of the poem. I don’t know, I take a lot of money for this and I feel you ought to
do it professionally. You ought to see to it that you do it well and some poets are recording their work and giving readings who just don’t read well at all and I guess if you’re only going to do it once or twice a year, then that’s all right, you’re not a pro and you’re not pretending to be. But it can get to be so much of a performance that it does seem phony. On the other hand, I know some young poets who have worked very carefully with a tape recorder and everything—the sloppiest performance—the most calculated sloppy you know—where they will pull the poems out of a back pocket somewhere—they will be on old tattered pieces of paper and then they’ll have the wrong paper and shove that back and pull out two or three more papers and they will say it is all thought upon them on the moment—it’s just rehearsed sometimes—the sloppiest kind of performance you see will be very calculated.

WOODS: Well, if you have an audience who wants to see the poet in this fashion you are paying and getting your money’s worth.

SNODGRASS: When I first saw this I objected to it a great deal but I don’t know—I felt kind of tolerant and think that it works all right. If the audience likes that and will listen to the poem on account of it O.K.

WOODS: Admitting the usefulness and honor of the Pulitzer Prize, do you find it in any sense a liability?

SNODGRASS: Oh yeah. All your friends hate you. Everybody hates you, including you. You’ve pronounced great and sweeping anathemas upon all prize winners in the past and all people who got fellowships and awards and prizes. There are great personal drawbacks. I’m no longer addressed as Snodgrass. I’m Mr. Pulitzer Prize and you get sick and tired of being nothing but a function. You’d like to meet someone just for whoever you are. On the other hand, I must say it’s very useful, it gets you all kinds of readings and lectureships and whatnot and I happen to need them. Very useful that way. I must say I’m milking it for all it’s worth.

WOODS: I think Donald Hall had that problem. Time magazine eulogized him.

SNODGRASS: He was upset about that terribly. Everybody beat him up because what Time magazine had given him by reviews. And I am sure this is right, I am sure that he wouldn’t have been so beat up if Time had not first said they liked him.
Which is a shame. Well, I find the British reviewers are now beating me up and I am sure that part of the reason is that they're British and I'm American and they don't like to think that American poetry is overcoming British poetry. But it is also a desire to beat down that sort of prestigist note and resist it. And it's also possible they don't like my poems.

Words on the Ignorance of Birds

ironic that so many birds
soaring through a barren sky
can pan the plush of the peopled-world
and fly right by

MARGO GRAHN