

Our Other Voices

Nine Poets Speaking

Edited by John Wheatcroft



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Contents

Acknowledgments	7
Apologia	9
JOHN WHEATCROFT	
✓Wendell Berry	13
An Anniversary (poem)	17
A Question a Day: A Written Conversation with Wendell Berry	18
MINDY WEINREB	
Hayden Carruth	33
24, 44, 78 (poems from <i>The Sleeping Beauty</i>)	37
Where Are We Going, Hayden Carruth? (interview)	39
MINDY WEINREB	
Irving Feldman	61
The Memorable (poem)	64
An Interview	65
HAROLD SCHWEIZER	
Donald Hall	81
Ox Cart Man (poem)	86
An Interview	87
HAROLD SCHWEIZER	
Josephine Jacobsen	103
The Sisters (poem)	107
A Conversation with Her Sister: An Interview with Josephine Jacobsen	109
JOHN WHEATCROFT	
Mary Oliver	135
Humpbacks (poem)	138
Against the Grain: An Interview	140
MINDY WEINREB	
Karl Shapiro	153

At Auden's Grave (poem)	157	
At Auden's Grave: Writing the Poem	160	
Derek Walcott		171
A Latin Primer (poem)	175	
A Conversation with Derek Walcott (interview)	178	
RICHARD E. SMITH		
John Wheatcroft		197
At a Certain Table in a Bar (poem)	200	
Confessions of a Boy Soprano: An Interview	201	
PETER BALAKIAN and BRUCE SMITH		

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Acknowledgments	7
Apologia	9
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✓ Wendell Berry	13
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Josephine Jacobsen	103
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Mary Oliver	135
Humpbacks (poem)	138
Against the Grain: An Interview	140
MINDY WEINREB	
✓ Karl Shapiro	153

At Auden's Grave (poem)	157	
At Auden's Grave: Writing the Poem	160	
Derek Walcott		171
A Latin Primer (poem)	175	
A Conversation with Derek Walcott (interview)	178	
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Apologia

JOHN WHEATCROFT

These are our other voices.

The questions that have been put to us are sensible. Curiosity about us is understandable. To want us to explain ourselves—what we do and how and why we do it—is natural. It is gratifying, we confess, to be wondered about by even a few.

Furthermore, it's reasonable to ask us to declare ourselves on the burning issues of the day, on the issues that consumed the past, on the issues that threaten to incinerate the future. Since we are citizens, it's perfectly fair to expect us to go on record, to invite us to stand up and be counted.

We must warn you, however, not to give undue weight to our pronouncements. When we pontificate, utter jeremiads, offer apocalyptic visions, lend us the same credence but no more than you would your neighbor or hairdresser, your favorite bartender or shrink when they are holding forth. Expect no more wisdom from us than you know you yourself are capable of.

When speaking about our art, or craft, we're no more omniscient than we are when talking about history, the state of the world, grand ideas. We hope you won't expect us to provide rules, formulas, principles, or methods that will help you to write. We can't articulate universal standards of critical judgment. Yet please believe that we're neither evading nor deliberately misleading you.

For we are trying. We are attempting to tell you how we imagine we write our poems—how we imagine poems come to us and ask us to write them. We do speculate about where we think a particular poem has come from. We offer opinions about what this poem or this line of ours means. We suggest how we want our poems to be taken. We explain what our poetics is, or isn't. We declare ourselves on formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, Marxian, Freudian, and feminist theory. We proclaim how in writing poetry we respond to racism, sexism, oppression,

disenfranchisement, injustice. We indicate how we believe we are interacting with the temper of our age. We venture to say what effect we hope or doubt poetry has on the beleaguered human race. We even presume to diagnose ourselves as private persons.

In offering all these pronouncements we intend to be sincere. Determined to be true to our convictions and faithful to our practice, we are attempting to be considered and to provide cogent explanations. Give us credit for being as thoughtful and honest as we can, as anyone can when speaking in the voice that comes from the head.

Yet we're aware that when we try to explain ourselves in these our other voices we're susceptible to all the tricks of thinking and declaring the human mind can't help playing on itself. We know that we censor, displace, substitute, sublimate, rationalize, settle for partial truth, hedge, and defend ourselves. Taking in the irony, we realize that when we're self-aware and self-conscious, we're less reliable than when we're not; that when we choose to be direct and explicit, we can't be as precise as when we're oblique; that when we want to be candid and open, we may well be subtly devious.

Notice how irreconcilably we differ among ourselves. You can't help noticing that we're sometimes illogical, inconsistent, self-contradictory. We grant that we're short on reason, order, system. Take such chaos as a sign of our good faith.

Please be charitable—and forgiving too. Far better that we pose and strut, exhibit, aggrandize and dramatize ourselves in prose on these pages than in metaphor on other pages.

Above all, realize that the fault lies not in our intention but in our tongue: the language of these our other voices has insurmountable limitations. These are not the words by which we shall be justified or condemned.

To entice you to listen to the voices of our poems is why we expose ourselves here. When you listen to our poetic voices, hold us to every word, every sound, yes, every silence.