TEXAS REVIEW PRESS INTERVIEW

TR:      Your dissertation was called “A New Poetics of Silence: Joyce, Beckett, Cage” and therefore you have done a great deal of work on them to complete it. Has that work influenced your own writing?

WO: Joyce has been a profound influence on my writing and my thinking, as he has been for so many artists. I wrote my dissertation partly on *Finnegans Wake*, but it is Joyce’s mastery of the short story form in *Dubliners* that most impresses me. Sharp-eyed Joyce fans may spot hidden references to moments from Joyce books inside my own writing.

 John Cage is another story. I very much admire his philosophy of art, and indeed of life. I don’t think it has been a direct influence on how I write, however. I do not use aleatory methods or disavow intention.

TR:      Are there other writers you have read that have influenced you in both your choice of forms and themes?

WO: Many. The writers who most influence me tend to be the British and American Modernists: Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Lawrence, Hemingway, and of course Flannery O’Connor. I find in them the combination of excellent artistry at the level of the sentence, and philosophical significance, that makes me want to read and write. I’m less impressed with postmodern fiction, largely because of its embrace of irony. There are, of course, shining exceptions.

WO:     Many of the stories deal with a question of faith, such as Father Johan Cahillane’s as he watches his friend and fellow clergy member succumb to Alzheimer’s disease, and so do you believe that faith and medicine can work together to help a patient heal?

WO: There is no question. Faith in its broadest sense—which I would define as a Yes to life—is life-giving and health-giving. Faith as irrational acceptance of a metaphysical claim shrinks the mind and opposes health.

 Johan Cahillane’s situation is quite different, though. His faith has taken the form of an angry intellectual insistence, and only through having that faith shattered will it become possible for him to experience compassion.

TR:      Do you read your own work after it is published? If so, do your perceptions of it change with time?

WO: I tend not to read it after it has been published because I have prepared each element so carefully, and read it so many times beforehand, that there is a somewhat painful process of letting go. My fear is that I will see something I would love to change, and it will be too late to do so.

TR:     You write a blog dealing with physics and cosmology and have a B.A. in Psychology and Neuroscience. How does this interest in the sciences intersect your fiction and your creative writing in general?

WO: People often ask me why I don’t write science fiction, given that I am interested in science and also write fiction. Really the connection is that I am interested in what are sometimes called the Deep Questions: Why does the cosmos exist, and why does it have the character that it does? Is objective reality knowable at its core, or is reality ultimately irrational? What is consciousness, and why is it here? Why are we so wonderfully and terribly different from all other species? These questions, long relegated to religious faith, are now coming under the purview of scientific inquiry.

 The human response to the conditions of existence is another matter. That is the realm of philosophy—

which, for me, is best expressed through art.

TR:     You have published in a wide range of genres and forms, why did you decide to make Across the River a novella? How do you see the novella as differing from a short story collection or a novel?

WO: My first two books, *Zombi, You My Love*, and *Across the River* can both be called “novel-in-stories.” That is, one can read any given story from the collection and, if I have done my job well, come away with a distinct and satisfying aesthetic experience. If one chooses to read from beginning to end, a larger narrative emerges: in *Zombi, You My Love*, it’s the story of an American photojournalist who travels to Haiti on the eve of the revolution, hoping to convince a missionary he loves to leave with him. In *Across the River* it’s the experience of a college intern named Todd Sproles who spends his winter break interning at a hospital in D.C., and through his experiences there comes to a vision of his own corporeality.

 A short story collection is just that: a collection of stories by one author. Though themes emerge and images recur, it’s not generally an expression of narrative drive that extends from one story to the next. Forming a novella out of discrete but linked stories, in *Across the River*, allowed me the pleasures of both the short story writer and the novelist. There is also a concluding poem at the end of each section.

TR:    Your newest novel, *Killer of Crying Deer*, is set in 17th century Florida and has a pirate as one of the main characters. How did this idea come to you?

WO: One of the idea put forth in *Killer of Crying Deer* is that the “pirates” or “privateers” had more of a formative role in the creation of the New World than did the official seats of power. It’s a novel essentially about the competition for what will become America: piracy, slave trade, Franciscan missionaries, and native American tribes are all in the mix.

 I have spent a good deal of time in the Florida Keys, staying down there once or twice a year for the past decade. Though I am not originally from Florida, the history of the region began to fascinate me, and I write about things that I want to understand. The historical research I did when writing *Killer of Crying Deer* in itself was half the reward.

TR:     You are the writer-in-residence at Emerson College, what does that entail? Does the literary history of Boston inspire you?

WO: I am one of several Writers in Residence; as the name suggests, I am partly paid to write my next book, but the day-to-day is teaching classes. I teach undergraduate and graduate workshops in fiction and in playwriting, and on occasion I teach graduate or undergraduate literature classes.

 And yes, Boston and surrounds make for a magnificently inspiring region for anyone who responds to literary history. Every Halloween I carry a jack-o-lantern to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s grave on Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concorde to thank him for writing “Young Goodman Brown.” On the way there you can say hello to Emerson, Thoreau, and the Alcotts. This part of the country is full of such moments.

TR:     You have said that *Across the River* comes from your lab work at the National Institute for Mental Health, but it is set in a traditional hospital where the doctors are often unable to help patients heal and we feel their suffering. Do you believe that the reader should learn from your work?

WO: My work at the NIMH started the imagery in my own mind that would later coalesce into *Across the River*, but it isn’t a scientific work. What I mean is this: *Across the River* is written in the tragic mode, as the epigraph from S. H. Butcher shows. The purpose of tragedy is to purge our souls by way of extreme suffering so that they reach a kind of bedrock from which authentic personal growth can take place. I would like the reader not to learn anything in particular so much as to experience the suffering of my characters, be emptied out as they are, and to rise again into the richness of their own actual lives. It is only the emptied vessel, so to speak, that can be freshly filled.

 This, however, is in the service of literature. Medical science is making great advances against the ills that beset us all—I say this as a cancer survivor myself—and readers who endure any of these problems have every reason to hope.

TR:  Do you feel a need to connect with your readers? If so, in what way?

WO: A lot of people have been telling me recently that the modern author needs to tweet and blog and run contests of Facebook. At the moment I don’t agree. I feel a profound desire to speak to people, but what I want to say is exactly what is contained within my book. I feel this as a reader as well. It doesn’t make sense to me to read, say, Kafka’s *“A Hunger Artist”* and then log on to the author’s web site and ask him what he meant. Art is a different thing from chat.

TR:   The novella begins and ends with a story about Todd and he is one of the more hopeful characters in the work due to his ability to connect with people. Can that connection with people make him a better doctor? Or does he need to be detached to be an effective healer?

WO: It’s an excellent question, and one I would prefer not to answer more directly than the book does. I would only say that the same question confronts Nathaniel Galley in the eponymous story, the younger doctor in “That Elusive Quality of Life,” and others. That distinction is central to the book’s meaning: whether medicine’s job is to oppose mortality or enliven humanity, and what healing ultimately means. We are all, ultimately, going across the river; how we touch until that time is of utmost importance.