

Prick of the Spindle

A Conversation with Rosanna Warren
Stephanie Renae Johnson

Stephanie Renae Johnson: Thank you so much for doing this interview. I loved *Stained Glass* and *Departure*, but I find them to be vastly different—as a poet, do you start to pick your matter with a collection and theme in mind, or does it evolve from pieces and form organically and become a whole through careful editing?

Rosanna Warren: My collections of poems evolve, poem by poem, until they start to take larger shape, like a coral reef. Just as it's important, when writing a single poem, to keep the process open and the poem permeable to discoveries one couldn't have anticipated, so my books surprise me by the directions they take. Otherwise, I'd have no motive for writing. I write in order to discover what I don't know, what I don't yet realize I feel. I knew that my most recent book, *Ghost in a Red Hat*, would be structured loosely around the four elements, Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, and when I'd composed a long four-part water poem ("Water Damage," about the composer Schumann), I saw my way to writing an equally ambitious four-part Earth poem,

"Earthworks," about the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. But it became clear to me that Fire and Air would not command equally symmetrical poems, and the book took another course. Fire and Air are in there, but more secretly.

SRJ: I'm curious about the process itself for your work. You write in your poem, "Diversion" (as seen in *Departure*), "[I am] tired of my notebooks and my reluctant pen," and I'm sure many other authors agree with you. How long do you spend writing a day and when do you know it's time to stop?

RW: How long I get to spend writing on any day depends on whether or not I'm teaching, and on other external constraints. In a full-tilt academic semester, days can be so full of classes and meetings that the only writing might be jotting in a notebook. During blessed summers or academic leaves, I can devote whole days to the musing, predatory reading, and scribbling that are all part of my compositional rite. When I write criticism, I sit at my desk. When composing poetry, or inviting poetry to come seize me, I like to sit back in what I call my Poetry Boat, an easy chair or sofa where I can relax into a meditative, receptive posture, my notebook on my knee, pen in hand. I always write by hand. I stop when my brain doesn't seem to be working anymore, and rebels. But hours can go by before that happens.

SRJ: Your poems are littered with enjambment, and the shapes of them are so intricate. In several poems, the words echo in shape what they first speak in content. For example, in the poem "Daily Mail," the lines, "down from his front porch / he steps / the old / man" form a small stoop, between the words and the negative space. Do you set out for this or discover it later in editing?

RW: I'm delighted that you noticed my old man! Discovery is always part of the composing, but composing unfolds in many stages, often taking months for a single poem, and I can't distinguish "editing" from composing. Because I write both in metrical verse and free verse, and have always done so, I have to putter around a good deal with a possible poem to see what kind of shape it seems to be asking for. Writing for me is quite a lot like drawing: that's why I need notebook and pen, why I need to let the pen explore the page, and experiment with line shapes

which I then murmur to myself. It's a process both visual and auditory. If I'm lucky, if a poem insists on coming into being, the rhythm catches hold, a voice becomes inwardly clear to me, and the lines start adhering to some constraint that creates tension.

SRJ: It's said that you touch upon both your own life and the work of other poets. What challenges do you find while examining the work of others, specifically with the aim of composing a poem in mind?

RW: *Ghost in a Red Hat* came out in the spring of 2011. It's a ghost story, in a free and associative way: it starts with a poem about the ghost of my mother, and concludes with a poem about the ghost of my younger self, and in the middle Frederick Law Olmsted appears as a ghost. Ghosts are intensifications, distillations, of a person's being. Poems are distillations of experience. So they seem to me ideal shelters for ghosts. The work of other poets is what makes poetry possible: we know how to write poems only because we absorbed the art that taught us who we are, how to feel in rhythm and image, how to play with words so that our own experience and the experience of others becomes comprehensible. We might think of the poets from whom we learn as ghosts: it's an art of communing with ghosts, talking with spirits, listening to spirits, attuning our hearing to a finer pitch so that we can hear them. Any writer listens to many spirits. Some of mine are: Horace, Villon, Milton, Donne, Baudelaire, Hardy, Rimbaud... Hardy was, by the way, a deeply haunted poet. His poems have more ghosts than live people in them.

SRJ: I've noticed in previous books that you've also dedicated poems to other writers. In *Departure*, I was amused to notice you dedicated a poem, "Hellenistic Head," to Derek Walcott, whom you'll be hosting in a discussion with Seamus Heaney March 2013 at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference. What do you respect most about Mr. Walcott, Mr. Heaney, and their writing?

RW: I would have to write a whole book to try to answer that question! But perhaps I can suggest that both Heaney and Walcott are great listeners to the spirits: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Wyatt, Shakespeare, Meredith, Hardy, Robert Lowell, and many many others are whispering

through them. Majestic art happens when the poet in the present transforms the ancestral voices into a new key, and that is what Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney have both done. Nobody ever invents a completely new language, but the masters take what they've inherited and mysteriously renew it. To change the metaphor, we could think of it as recombinant DNA.

SRJ: I found your essay on Sylvia Plath, "Forsaken Favorites," particularly pertinent to our conversation. Just as you rediscovered Plath in an alternate light as you grew older, have you had a similar opinion change about your poetry? Do you feel that your own poetry might grow with the reader?

RW: Do you mean, does my opinion of my own work change over the years, or do I imagine that other readers would change in their feelings about my work? Both, I suppose. Inevitably, as one grows older, one's sense of life's possibilities and gravities deepens. For instance, I recently saw some early poems of mine printed in a new anthology of poems from the State of Connecticut, called *Garnet Poems*, published by Wesleyan University Press. I felt very distant from those early poems. They could have been written by someone else. They struck me as straining for effect in a show-offy way, characteristic of the young, I guess, as in a poem called "World Trade Center" from my first book, *Each Leaf Shines Separate*, published in 1984. The last two and a half lines read; "...Jeweled words / lie tossed on the blackened scroll: // tossed to the curled, soiled fringes of the world." Well, I understand that that young poet was drunk on word sounds, and got excited by the rhyme of "curled" and "world," and by the off-rhymes and alliteration in "scroll" and "soiled," but those sound games now strike my ear as painfully obvious and overstated. Still, if you don't get drunk on sounds, you're not fully alive to your medium. The problem then becomes one of exercising tact and tonal restraint. Without sacrificing intensity.

In the last two years, since completing the manuscript of *Ghost in a Red Hat*, I've been writing poems with generous stanza shapes, some rhyming and metrical, some in free verse. I sense an enlargement of spirit and inquiry in these poems. They've been demanding more room in which to explore, in their own sonar, the way the experience of time changes as one gets older. I'm almost 60 years old now, and more aware than ever of how an individual life fits into larger

rhythms—rhythms of the earth's seasons and of immense geological time. One becomes, perhaps, less furiously attached to one's own insistences. One listens for the pulse of messages sent back by limits: the limits of air and water on the earth, the limits of one's own strength and biology, the limits of one's sympathy.

SRJ: One specific example, I might imagine, of your poetry changing as a reader ages specifically applies to women—you have so many mothers in your work, specifically grieving mothers. As a young woman, I fail to fully relate to the speakers of poems like "Hagar" or "Umbilical" and can only grasp that brand of pain from a child's perspective. However, I imagine upon reading the poem later in life, I may feel it more deeply. Do you ever look back on your own work with increased perspective?

RW: Of course I look back on my work with increased perspective. As Shakespeare wrote, in sonnet 64, "Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare." But to address the example you give of not being able to relate to the experience of a grieving mother—most of literature is populated with characters who are not oneself and who do not share one's experience. Yet we go to literature to enlarge our experience imaginatively—to feel what it would be like to a king who has been imprisoned and who has lost his power (Shakespeare's Richard II), or a metaphysically inclined tramp (*Waiting for Godot*), or a terrified, deluded, mediocre scholar (Edward Causaubon in *Middlemarch*). Some part of us could be any of these creatures, could be in any of these predicaments. Literature is a continuous experiment in consciousness. It seems to me the greatest poverty is to be denied access to those experiments, and to be condemned to live in the cramped cell of one's immediate, literal circumstances and habitual ideas.