

Gifts and Questions

An Interview with Anne Carson

- KM The first thing I want to ask you is about interviews. We've been seeing your picture on magazine covers, and you've been interviewed quite a bit recently; some of your recent books from *Autobiography of Red* to *Men In the Off Hours* have interviews in them.
- AC You'd think that would discourage people. [Laughs.]
- KM Do you think there is a poetics of the interview?
- AC No, I think the whole form is a mistake. So I intended to undermine it before the event, but it didn't work.
- KM You still seem to be conscripted into giving interviews.
- AC I do. I avoid most of them, most conscriptions, but the odd time I feel accountable. I'm not trying to make you feel sheepish. It just isn't a form that I find very useful, because I end up lying. There is this pressure to say something moderately wise in every space and you know in ordinary conversation in the world wisdom doesn't occur in every space. So it's unnerving.
- KM Many of your poems blend the colloquial with a kind of intensified language. You seem to shift back and forth sometimes between those two modes, is that fair?
- AC That's probably fair. I didn't think of it that way, but . . .
- KM You make an awful lot sometimes of certain kinds of colloquial language. Common speech becomes weighty in some of your poems. Where an everyday phrase like "this is mental" or something like that takes on an awful lot of weight. It seems like you're exploring the weight of the colloquial, or what's hidden in it.
- AC Well I guess I don't think of it as colloquial; I think of it as the floor and the walls. If you want to refer to the unconscious mind, you can't do

that in any very pretentious way without having it take over the narrative. So to find the plainest way to say “here we are in the subconscious” is important to the balance of the narrative.

KM A lot of critical acclaim for your work has come from the United States. I know you teach there, and live there, and I was wondering if you could address in some form or another the “Canadianness” of your writing. Do you see any national aspect to your work? I don’t necessarily need you to address the idea of cultural nationalism, but I was just curious because you’re currently nominated for a Governor General’s Award, and yet a lot of the acclaim for your work has come from the United States. Do you feel that crossover tension at all?

AC I’m not sure what tension you mean. Are we talking about inspiration of work or recognition of work?

KM How about both?

AC Well, inspiration of work comes from wherever I happen to be, but the paradigm that I take with me for registering perceptions is from where I lived when I was young. So I’d look for those kinds of light and rocks and smells and moods and maybe that would add up to a Canadianness of the mentality at some deep level. But I don’t consciously think about it.

KM I wouldn’t want to force it. I was just curious because your work has been published to great acclaim in the United States, and it seems as if Canadian critics are catching up.

AC Possibly. I don’t know why that happens. I was published there a long time ago, and had a following, but probably that’s because I taught there and I knew people there. And it’s a matter of who you bump into largely, and I don’t want to accuse Canadian culture of being slow, Lord knows But it’s a different scheme here, a different set of cliques. The world of writing is a bunch of cliques—so you get into a certain clique, and you meet those people, and that’s where it happens.

KM Well, what about something like travel or cosmopolitanism in your work? There are a large number linguistic frames of reference, historical frames of reference, different kinds of texts that you’re drawing on. You seem to work in a cosmopolitan framework, would that be fair to say?

AC Sure.

KM What about translation then? You mentioned yesterday in your talk [here at U.B.C.] that you like to translate badly. I think you were being a little ironic, but translation is involved in all that you do. Could you comment a bit of the poetics of translation? Do you think of yourself as

a translator-poet, or of translation as having a poetic aspect to it, or as a source for poetry?

AC I like the space between languages because it's a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all. And that's useful I think for writing because it's always good to put yourself off balance, to be dislodged from the complacency in which you normally go at perceiving the world and saying what you've perceived. And translation continually does that dislodging, so I respect the situation—although I don't think I like it. It's a useful edge to put yourself against.

KM It's interesting to have an aesthetics of unpleasantness. You'd think that poetry would be pleasant.

AC It can be. I think you can move to a pleasant place in composition, the act of composition, but that's not the place of thinking. It's the downhill slope after thinking.

KM So a kind of tension that's disruptive?

AC Yes, disruptive and strained tight.

KM Do you think of poetry as thought?

AC Yes, mainly.

KM This might be a point to ask you about the connections between your scholarship and your poetry. You're both a professor and a poet, and I know that some would say that the academy is not the place for poetry, that it thrives outside of its critical interpretation. Others—perhaps yourself included—seem to find ways in which the critical or the scholarly and the poetic collude or intersect. How do you view that intersection?

AC I never found any trouble with it. People do make trouble out of that border, but I never found it a problem because I just practically don't separate them. I put scholarly projects and so-called creative projects side-by-side in my workspace, and I cross back and forth between them or move sentences back and forth between them, and so cause them to permeate one another. So the thought is not that different. There's a different audience I guess, but nowadays that's less and less true. But the permeating, the cross-permutation is extremely helpful to me. Because actually the project of thinking is one in my head, trying to understand the world, so I might as well use whatever contexts are available. Academic contexts are available because they're ready; they're given by the world. You have to write umpteen academic articles to get tenure, and then creative vehicles you can invent. But they're both equally useful.

KM Whom do you view as your audience?

AC I don't know anymore. When I do readings, I'm often surprised at who the audience is: a lot of very young people and a lot of quite old people and a lack of a middle quite often. So I don't know what that means. Besides age I don't exactly have any definition of it. I think people are drawn to my work for all sorts of reasons, and there's no demographic definition there. But I don't find that I try to aim at an audience when I'm doing it.

KM Do you feel that the fact that your audience has grown substantially recently, and that *Autobiography of Red* is a best seller, has had any impact on how you think about writing?

AC I wouldn't say so. It may be slightly liberating, in that I feel that I could do anything I want and people would at least look at it; they might not like it, but they'd at least look at it. Before you have some celebrity you can't work in that confidence, and I think that's a bit gloomy—so there's the removal of a certain degree of gloom. But beyond that it doesn't give me any specific schedule of what to do.

KM What I was thinking of too was the notion of audience itself. I read and really admired *Economy of the Unlost*, where you suggest that poetry for Simonides and Paul Celan involves a kind of economy, a kind of exchange, or a network—and a registering of, if not audience, at least of giving and of gift. Do you see poems as gifts?

AC Ideally. I think that the gift-exchange circuit is more or less broken down in our culture, simply because our culture is too big. When you're writing a book nowadays for Knopf which is owned by Random House, which is owned by Viacom which is owned by the Bertelsmann brothers in Germany, the context is too expanded to grasp, whereas somebody like Pindar was speaking to twenty-five people he'd known all his life. An exchange of gifts is very abstract when you're talking to an audience that might include people you'll never even know about. So I don't think in any real sense that it's an exchange anymore, except in a reading situation. There's something that happens there when you're physically present doing a reading that's an exchange, but the multiple copies going out to a zillion people, it's hard to have a sense of that as a sensual and emotional experience, whereas someone like Pindar did have that, and felt the burden of it.

KM Perhaps in composition rather than in performance—do you feel that there is any gift-like structure when you're writing a poem? Even if the

material circumstance of audience—this kind of intimacy and community—is lost, do you still feel some sort of community, or does that idea of giving or of gift register in any way during the composition of the poem?

AC I think the attempt to make sense is always involved in that exchange, and you can call that a gift. You don't make sense for yourself; you make sense to tell someone else. So there is a social conscience present in that activity, but I don't think that context is emotionally or psychologically anything like it was for an ancient poet, where he would be aware in a personal sense of the mentality of his audience, and he would respond to it.

KM Speaking of ancient poets, it was interesting to me in your first book *Eros The Bittersweet* that you dwelt on the concept of love in Plato in the *Phaedrus*, and what kept going through my mind was Plato's expulsion of the ancient poets from the Republic because they were imitators, because of the problem of *mimesis*, because it's erroneous or blind, and it's interesting to me that you would want to look back to Plato for a poetic.

AC Well you don't look to Plato for a poetic, you look to him for thought in general—he did that pretty well. I think that *The Republic* is a tricky text, and the whole thing is some kind of allegory, and I frankly think it's an allegory in which he tried to make Socrates say the most outrageous things anybody could ever say about a city, in order to cause people to think back from that extreme image to a city in which they might actually live. I mean it's a deliberate exercise in shocking, and it does shock, and it would have shocked his own audience to expel poets from the city. But he has a wiliness that's important not to take simply. I think Plato is a place to train yourself in how to use thoughts; he's not a person to quote for the opinions of his interlocutors.

KM Or to use them dogmatically.

AC Yes, or to ever think that it's not fiction. He made them into dramatic fictions.

KM So Plato's a liar, is what you're saying.

AC Yes, and he would be the first to admit that. He's making myths, and he calls them myths. For him it's a poignant kind of lying because he's trying to convey the truth of a person who actually existed who was Socrates, and Socrates wasn't lying I think. But Plato is in the position of the writer. Socrates didn't write anything, so he's free of this dilemma of what you do with the lies that you're telling when you come up against the truth of the world. Plato is stuck with that problem, so he deals with it in cunning ways.

- KM Are lying and error another name for this in-between, that you seem to value? I think you call it desire. I don't want to collapse all of those terms into one synonym, but . . .
- AC Lying and error are the same word for the Greeks, which is interesting. That is, "to be wrong" could have various causes: you wanted to lie, or you just didn't know the truth, or you forgot, and those are all one concept. That interests me, the bundling together and looking at the situation from a point of view of consequences and not motivation. I guess desire wanders through that area sometimes, but I wouldn't call it identical with error.
- KM I was thinking in this way because desire, at least psychologically, has an open-endedness to it, an unclosed-ness.
- AC Yes, if it works, right.
- KM I guess you can have misfires.
- AC Or you can have desire that is consummated and then it ends. Desire is fun while it's not ending. As soon as you get what you want you're no longer wanting.
- KM I know that many of your poems recently you've been calling essays, or you've been writing "lyrical essays" or "essay lyrics." I know that the essay, at least as it's framed as a genre, such as it is in Montaigne, is an open-ended form. Is it fair to say some of those poems are gestures at process or at attempt?
- AC Well that's what imitation is for the ancients. It's simply a mirroring of the activity of the thought that you had at the time that you had it, and an attempt to make that activity happen again in the mind of the listener of the reader. Probably that's always what I'm trying to do.
- KM Is this why you say things like "irony is a verb" or "desire is a verb," as opposed to the nominal. You point often towards process or to action or to performance.
- AC Yes, performance, I think so. The ancient poets thought of the publication of a poem as the time of saying it, and the time of saying it is also the time of it being heard, and that's the time when there's an exchange of that action, that verb, whatever the verb is that's being described. The verb happens.
- KM Are you conscious of that kind of happening when you're reading in public, or giving readings?
- AC Yes, at some times. That depends on the context and the lighting and stuff, but sometimes if you can see people's faces you have a sense of that.

KM I would want to name those moments “lyrical moments” or “musical moments.” I don’t know if you would agree with that. You just mentioned when we were talking about Plato the idea of myth or *mythos*, which is narrative form. You yourself have written narrative poems; if I’m not mistaken at one point in “The Glass Essay” you suggest that your voice is better at narrative than at lyric. How do you view the two poles of your work, the narrative structure that unfolds in time versus these moments of lyric intensity?

AC I think being successful at making lyrical moments is a musical ability firstly. That is you have to make it sound seductive; you have to draw the listener in to the sound so that he is irresistibly drawn into the sense, and I’m not good at that. I’m not musical. I make sometimes lines that have shape, but they tend to be pretty clunky. And I think that’s partly because of academic training and writing so much prose, but that’s also just innate—you have music in you or you don’t—so I can fight against that, but in the end I just won’t be a person who writes beautiful musical sonnets. That just won’t happen to me so I have to do the other thing, the narrative thing.

KM It’s quite interesting that you would admit to being non-musical, yet you would be currently working on libretti.

AC Well yes, it is of course, but how are you going to learn things you can’t do unless you keep trying? Anyway, in an opera the deal is that you write some kind of language and somebody else has to make it music. So it could be pretty bad on a musical level, and a good composer might still improve it into a lyrical effect. It was an exercise, writing the libretti, trying to be more musical, shaping things for the ear more than for the cognition.

KM You spoke here two days ago about women’s mysticism, and I know that the subject of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* [Marguerite Porete] is a mystic. Could you comment on—I don’t know if this connects to the sense of “lyric” or the musicality of language, but—on ties between the lyrical and the mystical; you called it “decreation” I think.

AC Simone Weil calls it that, yes. I think it varies a lot from mystic to mystic. In the ones that I’ve studied, some make an attempt to be musical and lyrical and use that as a point of access into the deeper insight that they wish to convey, and some don’t. And the woman who’s the subject of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* wrote almost entirely in prose, and actually very clunky prose, and I feel drawn to her for that reason, but every once in a while in the book’s 139 chapters of prose, she devolves into

- verse, and it's mysterious to me why she does that. I'd like to know what kind of thought it is exactly that calls for verse music out of a non-musical person, and I haven't got the answer to that.
- KM Is that what's drawn you to mystics such as Simone Weil—if you want to call her mystic—and others?
- AC What, the clunkiness?
- KM Yes, or the attempt to see, or to hear.
- AC Possibly, no. I think I was drawn to Simone Weil for other more philosophical reasons. She is the person who invented this term “decreation,” and that for me was a point of insight into other mystics I wanted to look at. But Simone herself has a very troubled relationship with language and with the beauty of language, and I think she's always trying to resist the lyric impulse, to actually reduce all the thought she has to as close to scientific as she can make it. She would have liked to write mathematical equations, I think, and leave it at that. So she is kind of a counter-example.
- KM Given that your most recent book is called *The Beauty of the Husband* and that you intersperse it with quotations from Keats . . .
- AC He's good at the music.
- KM You've talked about clunkiness; how can you talk about beauty in poetry? Some would argue that beauty as a concept has disappeared from the critical landscape, and others, Elaine Scarry for instance, are trying to recover the beautiful.
- AC I don't think it has disappeared for me, and I don't think for the people who are buying poetry books it has either. I think the beauty of an art object is part of the gift that you give to the receiver, the listener, the observer, to make it worthwhile for them to spend whatever time of their life they spend trying to understand it. That makes sense to me, because that's the way the Greeks think of it—perhaps it's not a modern way—but for the Greeks the word for “the beauty of a poem” is a term that can also be economic, a term we would translate as “grace.” So it means both the beauty that someone's face has, or that a statue has of the lines, or that a poem has, or music, but it can also mean the surplus value that a gift has, the value over and above monetary exchange because it's given for free. And I think that way of thinking of beauty makes sense to me. It's a mechanism of insight, but it's a mechanism of insight into what people need to receive from an artist when they're trying to understand her art.

KM I would expect that the title of *The Beauty of the Husband* refers to the famous line from Keats—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—but interestingly the quotations you intersperse in the text from Keats are mostly marginalia, little-known works, cross-outs, corrections. Why did you make that choice?

AC Just ornery. [Laughs.] I like the sentence about beauty as truth, but it falls on the ear of a modern hearer with a tired thump because we've heard it so many times. You can't think into something you've heard that many times, I don't believe, unless it's thrown at you from a wrong angle. And reading a lot of passages of bad Keats gives you another angle. But they're bad in an interesting way; I think when you take a bad text and break out a part of it—they're not any of them complete passages—the little part of it seems to me shiny in a way that provokes thought. And when you know that it's Keats you're willing to respect it enough to think what the shininess is about. If it were just some other guy from Keats' milieu writing that badly you probably wouldn't give it a second thought. So I wanted to use some kind of drawing-in mechanism that was traditional, but not beautiful in a conventional way that wouldn't register because it was so ordinary or well known, and also some kind of cultural monument. I wanted to have a little bit of pretension scattered throughout the thing to undercut the whole project of trying to describe beauty.

KM Perhaps this connects to ideas of error or mistake, but if your thinking is drawn to sites of revision and of correction, and of re-making, is there any relationship between that and what I take to be your own notion of "voices in process" or voices in poetry that discover themselves, rethink themselves, or revise themselves as they go? You have second and third drafts of poems throughout *Men in the Off Hours*.

AC I'm not sure where that comes from. There's a mistrust there of the surface. Possibly it's scholarly hesitation, because the texts that I deal with in classics are most of the time incomplete, emended, full of mistakes, conjectured, and so on, and you learn to kind of resist the surface in dealing with classical texts, and if you transfer that to your own work, then there's no reason to trust the first version you put on the page—it might be wrong. You could emend your own work, and it's interesting to think of what you're emending towards, when you emend your own work, what came before the thought in what you thought was the first version, or the true original version. You can dig through your own

- original version, I don't know what that would be, but prior opinion.
- KM In your criticism, as I've read it, there's a kind of archeological interest. But it's spun in a different way, as I think you pointed out yesterday, than a philologist might spin it, where instead of looking at a fragment and trying to reconstruct it, you take the fragment as a finished poem and then read it in its fragmentary nature. That strikes me as an interesting and also rather strange kind of critical enterprise. What makes you want to take the fragment as a kind of poem?
- AC Well why wouldn't you? Because a fact is a fact, there it is.
- KM As we have it?
- AC As we have it, yes.
- KM Is it because it registers the entropic nature of the historical—that things have fallen away?
- AC Maybe, partly. The space itself is seductive; the space of not knowing has always been seductive to humans. But I think more bluntly it's just that I enjoy facts, and the fact of the matter with a fragment is that it's mostly gone, so you might as well confront that, engage that.
- KM You say at the end of *Men in the Off Hours* that "crossouts sustain me now," and I know this has a personal context for you—in an essay on the death of your mother—but in what sense are crossouts sustaining?
- AC Well, I think that visually the way that's printed there you can see the Virginia Woolf lines, you can see the words through the crossout, and I very much like that fact. The crossout is supposed to be the cancellation of an idea, and the idea remains uncanceled—you can read it right through the line. That seems to me perky, that they keep punching through our attempts to cancel them. And that perkiness of ideas themselves is sustaining, is hopeful.
- KM That crossout from Woolf seems to provide a visual structure for the other epitaphs in *Men in the Off Hours*. Is that so?
- AC No, actually the model for the epitaph was Simonides because I was working on the economy book at the same time, which has a chapter on epitaphs. So the form began to interest me, writing an epitaph for things that actually can't die interests me.
- KM So were the verse forms themselves also derived from Simonides?
- AC Yes, the shape in Greek is a hexameter and pentameter line, so six beats then five beats. So I just tried to make long and short lines. But in the classical form the hexameter and pentameter lock together in a way that's very interesting but that doesn't come across in English, so I tried

to make the idea in the lock analogous to that. I don't think it worked most of the time but it was interesting to try.

KM Some of the epitaphs and some of the other poems are very visual, and I know that you've got a sequence of captions or commentaries on Edward Hopper, and I'm wondering about the ekphrastic in your work. Do you conceive your work in any visual sense?

AC Oh always; I mostly think of my work as a painting.

KM *Ut pictura poesis*?

AC No, not capturing what's out the window. But making it like what Mallarmé talks about, using words so that you create a surface that leaves an impression in the mind no matter what the words mean. It's not about the meaning of each individual word adding up to a proposition; it's about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning, you know as impressionist colours interact, daubs of paint, and you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other. You can also do that with language.

KM The epigraph that you attach to that sequence from Hopper, "I hope it does not tell an obvious anecdote for none is intended." . . .

AC No story intended, no narrative intended.

KM This is interesting because you cast yourself often as a poet who's oriented towards narrative, and yet there's a kind of withdrawal from the narrative.

AC I think I was trying to withdraw from the project of narrativizing the paintings, which is what they first of all demand of any viewer: you see the couple sitting in the café at three o'clock in the morning and you think of the story. And I believe that's the last thing he wanted to have people do to his paintings, but everybody does it anyway. And I did in those poems, so I wanted to put his point of view in there to be fair, but he lost.

KM They're very nominal though; I know that a number of the Hopper poems focus on things and on tangible language, which seems not necessarily to mitigate against, but perhaps to move in a different direction from the verbal, performative aspects of language. Do you see any connections between this kind of nominalizing, this very physical sort of language, the visual, and something that is a little more temporalized, like the verb?

AC Well I think that the verbs there come at the bottom in the Augustine quotes, which are all about time and about time disappearing; a whole sequence of Augustine at the bottoms of the pages is a verb, it's one

verb: time goes. But the paintings are still there, and they're full of objects. If you try this, if you want to make a poem about a painting, you have to talk about objects; that's what's in it. Even if it's abstract, you have to talk about the paint as an object.

- KM So why introduce the contrast with Augustine at the bottom?
- AC Where I studied the Hopper paintings overall, his whole output, he seems to be trying to paint time. There's really nothing else in them, no other questions in them than "what does time feel like?"
- KM You called that last poem in that sequence—the only one without Augustine—"The Glove of Time."
- AC Yeah, that's my own sort of pasted-on response to the whole experience of looking at Hopper. It also has a line from John Ashbery in it, which you may recognize, so it was my attempt to understand John Ashbery.
- KM His interest in painting?
- AC No, more his way of using language, which is painterly, but in a cognitive way he's just dabbing together chunks of raw idiom, and coming up with some surface that's supposed to evoke real life. And in a weird way it does but it is also out of your grasp every minute.
- KM Mark Vessey, a colleague of mine who studies Augustine, looked up the quotations you added at the bottom of the Hopper sequence and was wondering why you chose the particular translation you did, which is a nineteenth-century one.
- AC For the elegance. I wanted it to register on the ear differently than the Hopper, than the above.
- KM So it's a kind of archaic language?
- AC Yes, a little bit. I wouldn't say archaic: anachronistic rather.
- KM There's a quotation I quite like from *Economy of the Unlost*—it's the first line, actually, in the note on method that you attached to the beginning of the lectures—where you say "there's too much self in my writing," to which I think you then offer some corrective. For someone who writes confessions and autobiographies, it seems both important and curious that you would worry over there being too much self. I think at the beginning you mention that it's a sort of scholarly reflex. How can you talk about an autobiography without too much self, or confessions without too much self?
- AC You can't, and that's why it's a problem
- KM So it's a question of the problem, rather than . . .
- AC Rather than what?

KM I don't know. [Laughs.]

AC I don't see anything it can be other than a problem. Too much self could never be a satisfying situation or something that one was at ease with.

KM You could argue that much of your writing is fairly abstract, or fairly textual, since it deals with translation and other writers, and yet in *Men in the Off Hours* you have what are clearly biographical pieces on Akhmatova or on other writers, and in the appendix you clearly refer to events in your own life. In the blurbs you attach to the ends of your book—I don't know if you're responsible for these—but the only information you tend give is "Anne Carson lives in Canada," so you tend to be quite reticent about life, and yet the lived and lived experience seem to insinuate themselves into your work.

AC Well there's a difference between inside and outside the book. I think inside the book is a territory where subjects that one can't exactly control arise, needing to be expressed. Outside the book, the cover, the interviews, is an area where one struggles to have a degree of control. I think it's not really in my hands what I end up writing about as subject matter inside.

KM Is writing—inside and outside—an exertion of control?

AC I think they're equally chaotic. The only control I can exert is to keep my photography, biography, and blurbs off the cover—which is a struggle. But inside I don't feel much control; I don't think writing is an effort of control. It's an effort of collaboration with whatever insights are available there.

KM A number of your collaborators throughout your writing career have been women; can you talk a little bit about the politics of gender, or the emergence of fairly clear and strong female voices in your work?

AC Well I have to have that don't I? That's who I am. Actually I think I've collaborated with men as much as women.

KM I know *Eros the Bittersweet* essentially starts with Sappho, and *Men in the Off Hours*, despite the title, begins with Virginia Woolf and Thucydides but moves from Sappho to Woolf, to Akhmatova or to Catherine Deneuve.

AC Yeah, but there's Artaud and Hopper. I think it's balanced. If you want to talk about "bittersweet eros" you have to start with Sappho because she started the phrase; that's just logical. I don't know, it doesn't seem . . . I don't see a question there.

KM Perhaps I'll edit that out. A lot of your work has been about pilgrimage.

How would you view the pilgrimage? I was thinking about “The Anthropology of Water,” and then . . .

- AC It’s a good question. I don’t know exactly how I view it now. At the time, I did the pilgrimage in Spain to see what it would be like to do a pilgrimage, and then I saw what it was like, and I think, I didn’t quite get it. There is a form, let’s say, called pilgrimage, which I participated in without really understanding what it was. So maybe that means it’s still an interesting question, but I don’t know what the question is, to me.
- KM Is there a theological aspect to your work?
- AC I suppose there’s a theological aspect in being human. I think it’s one of the things you have to decide what you think about, at some point in your life. God, you just have to bring your forces to bear on that. But I don’t feel I have any particular insight to offer on that topic, I just come back to it as one comes back to one’s shoes at a certain point in the day—there they are.
- KM You make God speak in *Glass, Irony and God*, but that God doesn’t particularly seem like a theological being; he seems very everyday.
- AC I guess it’s a groping. “The Truth About God” is a groping into ways one could ask the question. They’re pretty picayune, I think, just little threads of ways. It’s not a main highway into the question, but I don’t think I’m a person able to build that highway.
- KM Why go there then?
- AC Well just because it remains questionable. I just can’t get past it.
- KM Given the interview structure, then, it sounds like you prefer questions to answers.
- AC In general, yes. I think that’s pedagogical.
- KM To pursue a question rather than give an answer?
- AC Giving an answer closes a door, and in teaching you never want to do that. You want to stand in the doorway and make some interesting gestures so they’ll come in, but you never want to push them in and slam the door. They won’t learn anything there.
- KM Do you think of poetry as pedagogical, as a form of teaching?
- AC Well I think of being human as a form of teaching. Everything one does is a way of saying “so far this is what sense I’ve made of being me, you can think about it if you want to.” If that takes the form of writing, then the writing becomes pedagogical. But I think that’s just an offshoot of being alive as a human. You have to tell who you are.

Our thanks to James Armitage for technical assistance with the interview.