

# David Orr

## *On how he wields his poetry power*

Interviewed by Mark Oppenheimer

*David Orr writes regularly for The New York Times Book Review, where his essays about poetry have a habit of irking some and entralling others. I fall more in the entralled camp. David is a winner of the National Book Critics Circle's Nona Balakian Award, is a graduate of Princeton and Yale universities, and is now writing a book about poetry for HarperCollins. He lives in Ithaca, New York. From July 2008 to January 2009, he and I wrote back and forth via e-mail. The text of our conversation is below.*

**Mark Oppenheimer:** David, when I first met you, you were toiling away in law school. I was in grad school. Your love of poetry was one of those rumors we were all afraid to ask you about. How'd you get into poetry?

**David Orr:** Basically by mistake. When I was a sophomore in college, I bought Philip Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings* as part of an English Department survey course—you know, "Literature: 1850 to the Present" or something like that. But the book was actually meant for another section. So it sat unread on my shelf for months until I finally noticed it, took a look, and realized how terrific it was. I've been working on, or with, or around poetry ever since.

**MO:** Well, OK, but let's get more specific. You got turned on to (or by) Philip Larkin. I know the experience, actually—he's about the best there is for getting people into poetry. Right up there with, say, Frost. But what then? You were a sophomore ... where? Planning to major in what? How did your poetry instruction proceed from there?

**DO:** Oh, I see what you mean—but barring a few details, my answer's pretty much the same. I was an English major at Princeton, but I didn't begin focusing on poetry until shortly after my sopho-

more year. My “poetry instruction” consisted mostly of pestering some of the poets who were then on campus—Jim Richardson, Chase Twichell, C.K. Williams—until they gave me something to read. I also took a couple of creative writing classes, which were useful in that they helped me realize that I never wanted to attend an MFA program. (No knock on that career path; it’s just not for me.) After college, I spent a year working at a school in Brooklyn, then I headed to Yale Law, where I spent about half my time reading poetry and poetry criticism, and the other half frantically trying to pass the classes I’d been ignoring. I also spent a little time wading through the vast piles of unsolicited submissions at the *Yale Review*.

**MO:** That’s interesting—it sounds as if you came at your love of poetry from modern and contemporary stuff first. As a grad student, I audited J.D. McClatchy’s undergraduate poetry-writing seminar, and he had us read only contemporary or recent poets (nothing older than Elizabeth Bishop, as I recall); he was pretty emphatic that those were the voices that would ring in our ears, and that, to be frank, it was more important for us as writers to read current stuff than to spend time with the older classics. As an English major, were you reading older English poets—Donne, Milton, etc.—in classes? And have they been as important to your development as a critic as, say, Larkin or C.K. Williams?

**DO:** Absolutely—in fact, when I was younger and snottier, I used to get cranky because so few contemporary poets seemed to know much about Shakespeare, let alone Spenser or Sidney. (Or so I thought at the time—as is often the case, I had no idea what I was talking about.) In any event, it’s fair to say that Shakespeare, Herbert, and some of the Victorian poets have been as important to me as, say, Bishop or Paul Muldoon. I spent months in college working on an amazingly boring paper about Tennyson’s “Maud,” which is in some ways a lousy poem and in other ways a very interesting one.

**MO:** Who are some of the contemporary poets who appeal to the Renaissance man in you, who seem to use, or otherwise recall, older poets?

**DO:** Well, as the great bard Bono once said, “Every poet is a thief” (a line he stole from Eliot), so the field is pretty wide. Sticking with Paul Muldoon, there’s a good bit of John Donne in his writing, beyond the obvious fact that his poems have titles like “Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward.” Kay Ryan seems pretty Donne-ish to me as well. Plenty of people have noticed the Keats and Shakespeare in John Ashbery’s work. In general, though, when we’re talking about “older poets” influencing contemporary writers, we’re talking about Eliot, Stevens, Moore, Frost, Williams—the usual suspects.

**MO:** So, speaking of Kay Ryan, what’s your take?

**DO:** On Ryan as a poet? Or on her new job as poet laureate? If the first, my take is that she’s very good. If the second, my take is, God help her.

**MO:** Tell me more about that (as the shrinks say). What’s so good about her poetry? And what do you think of the institution of Poet Laureate of the United States?

**DO:** Ryan’s writing has two things every poet’s work needs: shape and arrogance. In her case, the arrogance lies in her willingness to be underestimated, which is a trait she shares with writers like Stevie Smith. It’s not necessarily a quality that’s going to serve Ryan well as poet laureate, since the post is so aggressively public. But hey, I could be underestimating her. As for the Poet Laureate institution, as far as I can tell, the job is just a means of ensuring that the media always have a person they can call whenever they have to write a story on poetry. That can be a good thing in some situations,

but it can also lead to a kind of laziness—a disinclination to find out what's really going on, and instead simply to quote whoever's currently camped out in the Library of Congress. All things considered, it seems to me that we might want to consider abolishing the position and using the \$35,000 to buy Xbox 360s for orphans. Or maybe cheeseburgers for poetry critics.

**MO:** Which, to my mind, brings us back to Larkin. I tend to think that if we had poets whose sense of the vernacular were as strong as his, who wrote the way people talk (or think they talk), we'd be less interested in the poet laureate. We'd be reading a poet like that, wouldn't we? So, do we have poets like that writing in English right now? Who are they? And, bonus question: If they exist, could they ever hope to have the fame of a Larkin, or Auden, or Frost? Or has culture just moved past poetry?

**DO:** Ah, the popularity of poetry: always a tricky subject. I think there's some truth to your argument about the vernacular, at least in the sense that it's very hard to speak to a larger audience without writing in a way that's going to seem familiar to that audience (which isn't necessarily the same as *being* familiar). People just don't have the patience. But it's also important to remember that plenty of British poets—John Wain, for instance—were writing poetry with a Larkinesque sensibility when Larkin was alive. You don't see their work holding the attention of contemporary American readers, which tends to undercut the notion that Larkin's style was the determining factor in his popular success. For what it's worth, we do have a number of poets who work in vernacular modes today—I'm thinking about people as various as Campbell McGrath and Gwendolyn Brooks (who died a few years ago, but whose work is still a strong influence on many writers).

As for whether the culture has moved past poetry, well, that's one of the poetry world's favorite things to argue about. There are two basic takes on the matter, which we might loosely and unfairly

call Populist and Snob. The Populist says that poetry is now written for the academy by the academy, which is why the broader culture doesn't care about it much. The Snob says that poetry has never been all that popular, really, so who cares if your neighbor reads it? There are problems with both arguments—and with the dozens of variations on each—but my feeling is that all the arguing and counter-arguing can be beside the point. People are frequently eager to learn about poetry (whether or not it's written "for" them), they just aren't eager to be lectured at. Which is fine with me, since I don't much like being lectured at either.

**MO:** What can we do about the Maya Angelous of the world? Like any good snob, I am horrified that she's more famous than, say, Kay Ryan or Mark Strand (to pick a favorite of mine). But what can I say to the person who says, "She moves me, and your poets don't"?

**DO:** I know what you mean. But every time I find myself thinking, "Could this person possibly be any stupider?," I remind myself that I own (and love) Hall and Oates's *Greatest Hits*. And suddenly the world is all awash with tolerance.

**MO:** So while we're on the subject of inaugural poets, as I write this we have recently learned that Elizabeth Alexander is the next one. Do you like having an inaugural poet? Do you like having this one?

**DO:** Sure, I like having inaugural poets. The poet laureate is basically an administrator, but an inaugural poet is doing something that relates to one of poetry's traditional functions: addressing a public audience in a public space. You'll sometimes see poets complain that the art is being used to endorse capitalism, imperialism, Wal-Mart, whatever, but my feeling is that if you want to play, then you have to show up. Reading at an inauguration is a way of showing up. And yes, I like having Elizabeth Alexander. She's not Frost (who is?), but she's a talented writer. Some guy at the *National Review* is al-

ready grouching that her poems are too sexual, so obviously she's doing something right. I hope she says "fuck" at least once, and maybe twice. [*She didn't.* —MO]

**MO:** What about occasional poetry in general? Why is it so bad?

**DO:** Because it's so hard to write. Poets are always fighting against the fact that readers and references change, which means that the more specific you get in a poem, the more that specificity can work against you across time. Occasional poems face a heightened version of this basic problem. If an occasional poem only addresses the event it's meant to memorialize, it's usually considered a failure—but an occasional poem that doesn't address its precipitating event isn't occasional at all. There's just not much room to maneuver between those two possibilities. W.S. Merwin does a good job framing this dilemma in his short poem "Elegy" (elegies often do double duty as occasional poems). That poem reads in its entirety: "Who would I send it to." Merwin's point is that elegies can't exist without the loss of the audience for whom they're truly intended, so the elegist is in the awkward position of simultaneously clinging to his subject and pushing that subject away. The logic is similar for any occasional poem, because once an occasion happens, it's happened.

**MO:** What kind of mail do you get from readers of your *New York Times* pieces?

**DO:** All kinds. I've gotten kind notes from people who once corresponded with Elizabeth Bishop, huffy notes from fans of Garrison Keillor, and many, many congratulatory notes from the enemies of various writers whose books I've reviewed unfavorably (there's more schadenfreude in the poetry world than in an episode of *Top Chef*). But mostly I get lots and lots and lots of poems. Also, somebody once sent me a letter asking me to burn down Emily Dickinson's house. I don't know why.

**MO:** About two years ago, you were involved in a major contretemps (congratulations!). Dana Goodyear wrote a piece in *The New Yorker* criticizing *Poetry* magazine; you wrote a piece in *The New York Times* criticizing her piece; lots of pieces ran (in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among other places) attacking one or the other of you; and then cows learned to fly and other crazy things happened. So, three questions: 1) What the hell was that all about? I mean really about? 2) It seemed to be that you were kind of saying, at the end, "Hey, who decided Dana Goodyear was important?" As you noted, she had a rather, well, unusual number of poems published in *The New Yorker*, where she happens to work. And she is one of a clutch of young, attractive, bright, deft, Ivy-educated poets who seem to be visible in a way that may irk poets who have been working a lot longer without selling more than a few dozen books (we could add Meghan O'Rourke and Eliza Griswold). So let me be blunt: what do you think of Goodyear's poetry? Which of her peers (say, mid-thirties) deserve book deals like hers, with publishers like Norton, Knopf, or Farrar, Straus and Giroux? Are the right people getting those plum deals? 3) Finally, Henry Kissinger once said that in academia the fights are so fierce because the stakes are so low. True of poetry?

**DO:** Oh Lord. Okay, I'll do my best. The contretemps (such as it was) was really about who gets to wear the biggest hat in the poetry world. For a long time, an informal association of old school publishing and academic institutions—including *The New Yorker*—more or less called the shots. The influence of that group (which probably wouldn't view itself as a group) has eroded a bit in the past twenty or thirty years as MFA programs have expanded across the country. When the Poetry Foundation got a \$150 million bequest in 2002, that money added yet another potential source of authority into the mix and threw everyone into a tizzy.

Goodyear's article was a hit piece on the Poetry Foundation crowd. I have no problem with hit pieces in general, or with hit

pieces on the Poetry Foundation in particular, but if you're going to write one, it's only fair to show the reader that you're carrying a gun and plan to use it. That's especially true when your audience doesn't know anything about the world you're talking about. But the article presented itself as a reported piece by a relatively neutral observer, rather than what it actually was: the opinionated take of someone who has a serious interest in which poetry world institutions end up mattering. As you point out, Goodyear's poetic career has been strongly supported by her employer. There's nothing wrong with that—she's a gifted writer, and *The New Yorker* is absolutely entitled to publish its employees—but it does mean that she's a participant in the poetry fray, not a bystander. And out of the 6,500 words in that article, there was only one vaguely positive quote about anything associated with the Poetry Foundation. That's as harsh as harsh gets, and I suspect most non-poets came away with no idea that they were basically getting the Corleone perspective on the Barzini family. It would have been better and fairer, it seems to me, if Goodyear or her editors had just cut four thousand words of reporting out of the piece and called it a critical essay.

That said, I have no personal difficulty with Dana Goodyear. As I said, I think she's a good writer, and I hope she becomes a great one (we could use a few). I also believe *The New Yorker* is a terrific magazine, and we'll all be lucky if they decide to devote real attention to poetry again. I think I'll leave it at that. It's certainly not my place to criticize anyone for being a “young, attractive, bright, deft, Ivy-educated poet who seem[s] to be visible in a way that may irk poets who have been working a lot longer,” because similar things probably get said about me. Except for the “attractive” bit. Possibly the “deft” part as well, although I do think I'm pretty good at changing a cat box without getting litter all over the floor.

As for the old “the fights are fierce because the stakes are low” line, yes, it's certainly true of the poetry world. But that's not the same as being true of poetry.