

*The New Salon: Writers in Conversation*

*Alice Quinn and Dan Chiasson:*

AN INTERVIEW

Washington Square is pleased to introduce a new section and series to the pages of our biannual literary magazine, The New Salon: Poets and Fiction Writers in Conversation. Taking place at the New York University Lillian Vernon Creative Writer's House, The New Salon brings talented emerging writers into an intimate setting to discuss the implications of their work and craft. What follows is a transcription of the inaugural salon that took place on Thursday, October 18, 2007 with a reading by poet Dan Chaisson, author of the poetry collections *Natural History*, *The Afterlife of Objects*, and *One Kind of Everything: Poem and Person in Contemporary America*; followed by a conversation between the poet and Alice Quinn, former poetry editor of *The New Yorker* and current Executive Director of the Poetry Society of America.

ALICE QUINN: Having the experience of reading Dan's poems at my desk at the *New Yorker* – my assistant Jenna is here too, who would read them, pretty much immediately after I did – I think you probably get the picture from hearing him read tonight that you instantly not only want to reread them, but need to reread them. You can't really take them in entirely in one reading. Often people will ask, what is it that you're looking for in a poem, and really, it's just the experience that only a poem can provide. That's kind of hard to express but it is a different experience from music, a different experience from ballet. It's its own kind of thing and everybody does it differently. Jean Valentine writes an incredibly different poem from John Ashbery, from your kind of poetry; but we who love poetry recognize a certain sort of jolt that we experience when we read a good poem. Emily Dickinson said it took the top

WINTER / SPRING 2008

of her head off. And in her poem about reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning for the first time, she expresses it this way: “I think I was enchanted / when first a somber girl / I read that Foreign Lady / the Dark—felt beautiful.” So I want to get Dan to talk a little bit about some of his sources because I think they’re so important and when I read him, I am often reminded of a poet I know he loves, Wallace Stevens, who meant a great deal to me, too. I still have my copy of the *Selected Poems*, with a sprig of honeysuckle from Ireland in the summer of 1969! I think it’s partly his elusivity, which still captivates me so. Stevens has these marvelous statements in something called “Adagia”: “the poem should resist the intelligence almost successfully” and “poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the bush.” I feel that there is a little bit of this in Dan. There is a kind of swerviness that is part Stevens, part George Herbert.

DAN CHIASSON: Yes. Of course it’s wonderful to think of Stevens as “sweet”—he seems sweet to me. Very unlike his austere reputation.

ALICE QUINN: I wanted you to talk just a little bit about how you got started writing poetry and whether you studied the way people made their poems or whether you analyzed the effect of the poems that you loved the most upon you, and established your aims. And then maybe you could talk about some of the early people who meant a lot to you.

DAN CHIASSON: Well, quoting those “Adagia” makes me realize that I am indebted—I mean it sounds absurd to say it—indebted to Stevens. It gives me far too much credit but I am indebted to Stevens. I mean I read Stevens when I didn’t know how to write poems, I am indebted to him far more, three thousand percent more, than the next closest poet. I have always read Wallace Stevens, I don’t know why. It’s like Shakespeare only in our English and our world. He’s that rich, he’s that robust, he’s that full, he’s that three-dimensional, he’s that, hmmm, widely sympathetic with humans; but he’s from Hartford and, you know, he wears recognizably twentieth century clothes. You can drive by his house there on what was the name of that street? Anyway, I’ve done it and it’s quite amazing. Anyway, absolutely, I read Stevens. When you were quoting the “Adagia” it made me think that one of the primary powers and forces of Stevens is this feeling of having wisdom deployed, and yet the wisdom remains a little elusive or fugitive, you know. So there is

this great authority to those statements, and he arrives at these statements of great authority, it seems to me in poems. And yet, the statements can’t be divorced from their contexts, they don’t have meaning aside from their contexts in poems. So that’s something that I absolutely strive for. Also--

ALICE QUINN: A certain sort of mystery.

DAN CHIASSON: Yeah, a certain sort of mystery but with an authority behind it also. And, let’s see, T.S. Eliot says this amazing thing that I’ve been thinking a lot about. He says, about Matthew Arnold, he had no real serenity; he had only an impeccable demeanor. I think that’s true of Stevens also and maybe of my own work, in terms of a question of how much demeanor can be, can stand in for serenity. Or, can there be a friction between serenity, an inner feeling of having resolved things, and demeanor, which a lot of these poems evince, a kind of demeanor, it seems to me, that you could describe as elegant or sophisticated, but I hope that feels—it feels to me—like an armor.

ALICE QUINN: At one point you spoke about your teacher, the great critic, William Pritchard of Amherst College, in a wonderful interview in a magazine called, *Guernica*, that I had never heard of.

DAN CHIASSON: That’s a really good magazine, online.

ALICE QUINN: You said that it would have been unthinkable for you to take creative writing around Pritchard, that it would have been like going into the classroom in a clown suit. He was so much the embodiment of the critic that to try to be writing poetry--

DAN CHIASSON: Yeah, I came up as a critic. I didn’t take any creative writing classes. I started writing seriously not until my mid-late twenties. It felt, suddenly, like a huge repression. You know, I don’t know my father, I find father figures everywhere. I could probably find one tonight if I get to know enough of you. I found a father in this fantastic man of letters, William Pritchard, and it was just out of the question that you would ever write creatively. If that’s a flaw in him, it’s okay, he has a lot of virtues; and anyway I really benefited from his sensibilities being totally dissociated. The critical sensibility was

over here and if you were going to take that seriously, which I did—I very much wanted to please him, I very much wanted to be a poetry critic—then it meant excluding creative work. Which can only be viewed, this long after the fact, as a very, very good thing for me.

ALICE QUINN: He was a little bit more a Frost guy than a Stevens’ reader.

DAN CHIASSON: That’s right, he’s a major Frost guy, but it’s not as though those two were mutually exclusive. I’m a Frost guy, too. Especially “A Boy’s Will,” which is actually very much behind my newest work.

ALICE QUINN: Well, this question of when you first got started, did you study the way other people made their poems, or did you try to think about your experience of those poems, an experience you wanted people to have reading your own poems?

DAN CHIASSON: Hmm... I’m not aware of ever studying a poem the way you would study it in order to teach it, or write about it, in order to write a poem. I’m not aware of ever having done that. I mean, probably many of you are teachers or have taught, and you know how you study a poem when you’re going to present it to students. I’ve never done that in order to write a poem. I don’t know how to say this without it being a little too mystified, but I think I allow the initial force of the poem to be the conduit to writing my own poem.

ALICE QUINN: Well, that’s interesting, “the initial force of the poem.” Another thing that I love, which Stevens wrote, is “poetry is the expression of the experience of poetry.” When you say the force, what are you dealing with? Is it an insight, is it an image, is it something that comes into your ear?

DAN CHIASSON: Let’s see, you just hold the poem, certain poems by Stevens I love, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, I think that’s the greatest Stevens poem though there are others that are pretty close. Anyway, you just hold that up as the model, as the standard, and you can’t imitate it really, although that maybe would yield an interesting poem, but I’ve never tried to imitate it. I’ve just tried to write something with the same effect. I want to write some-

thing that’s that moving by slightly oblique means.

ALICE QUINN: This is something I often tell people, just imitate a poem that you love, it will never come out the same. It will always come out as your poem. Something that you said about your first book really interested me. You said that the poems were about coercion, persuasion, and charm. They’re about things that you can do to somebody by being suddenly candid with them.

DAN CHIASSON: Right.

ALICE QUINN: Of course that made me think of the authorial voice in both Frank Bidart and Louise Glück who were models, early models.

DAN CHIASSON: Yes, I like those poets a lot, absolutely. I think, like them, I’m drawn to “real life” feelings and material; they’re very different from each other, and I’m different from both of them, but they’re a model of how one might represent “the self” without any sluggishness or boggishness or sense of being “confessional.” My impulse in my first book was to write poems that were about confessing, that were very self-aware about just what you said, what you are doing to somebody when you’re being candid with them. Many of the moments of most severe candor in my early poems that I read are confessing things that are made up, that didn’t happen to me. I guess all of these poems, the early poems, I was really thinking about confession and confessionality. I was trying to make it a self-conscious, theoretical if you like, subject. I write about it also. I’ve got a critical book, which is about confessional poetry and its aftermath, partly, so I think about it with the critical side of my head, too. That was the drive behind those poems.

ALICE QUINN: The poem that you read tonight, that moves from “quiet as a mug of milk” to the body as a bar of soap to talking about America and the family and to the scene with the father and “as he died he said Dan” Dan—it’s got this wild swerviness and yet there is a logic. How are you controlling that?

DAN CHIASSON: The swerviness is something I absolutely consciously strive

for. You want to be like on a slalom course. When you go too far in the direction of—

ALICE QUINN: A narrative.

DAN CHIASSON: A narrative, I'm very conscious of wanting to swerve away from that, and probably my poems are too formulaically counter-pointed. I would like to find a solution to that because I know how to go in the direction of personal material and then go in the direction of estranging or alienating material. I know how to go in the direction of narrative and then pull back, but it seems to me that that is a potential problem in what I'm doing, that the zigzagging is too formulaic. I just know how to do it. I could write a hundred more poems like that.

ALICE QUINN: There's a wonderful description by Robert Frost, "a poem should be like ice on a hot stove, it should ride on its own melting," which chimes a bit with that slalom effect you're after.

DAN CHIASSON: That's true. He also says that poems should be feats of association. I love that, I tell my students that. It's not just association. It's not a grab bag or haphazard or a popper full of balls, it's got to feel like a feat to get from A to B. Elsewhere he says that—

ALICE QUINN: Prowess.

DAN CHIASSON: That's right, a poet is a person of prowess, which is perfect, I think.

ALICE QUINN: Another poet that both Dan and I really love is George Herbert, and I was wondering if you might talk a little bit about the I, the me, the you in your poetry. A lot of the poems are addressed to a you. For instance, in two that you read tonight—the first was the smelt poem, which takes place, I think, in the Russian samovar, and seems addressed to Brodsky. Both the place and the food are big clues—

DAN CHIASSON: It was the Russian samovar. You can get Tarragon vodka

there, too. It's very good. It also used to be possible to see Barishnykov there, drinking and smiling. Perhaps it still is.

ALICE QUINN: In the second one, the you seems totally personal. The poem has a huge urgency and yet you've put them side by side. It's a different tenor, the you, completely.

DAN CHIASSON: I think that is learned from Herbert, the intensely engaged address to God as an intimate, God as a friend, and the sense almost of responding in those poems to God's responses, being in a dialogue. I think that's totally from Herbert. Another thing, I don't know what a Herbert scholar would say, but one thing I value in Herbert is, if you read a poem like "The Flower", a famous poem by Herbert, the conceit of the poem is the voice is of a flower talking, but he forgets the conceit for lines at a time. He is very nimbly moving in and out of this conceit. He's a flower saying things that a flower would and then all of a sudden he says things that only a suffering person would say. I just love that; Bishop I think does that too. I love that adroitness or nimbleness within conceits. That's something I'm very conscious of trying to do. I've got some new poems, for example, that are spoken by... Well in those elephant poems that you heard, I was trying not to be an elephant all the way through. I mean, the elephant doesn't go to a department party and get drunk and show off a photograph of his anus. I feel much better about that line now that Lillian Vernon is gone. I didn't do that either, but we've all done things that are embarrassing, and I actually wanted to write a line that would be embarrassing every time I read it. I didn't want to just depict embarrassment; I wanted to actually feel some embarrassment every time that line was read. To this day every time I've read it I've felt some embarrassment. I guess that's the Herbert influence in that I didn't want to too much the elephant in any one of those poems. I wanted to have access to all of the other things that are adjacent to elephants.

ALICE QUINN: That has a lot of the suppleness of Bishop's strayed crab.

DAN CHIASSON: Those are great, those little prose poems. Those are really, very behind those elephant poems.

ALICE QUINN: One of the things that I like particularly about Dan's writing

is his diction. It's very clear and supple, resilient, strong. I'm reminded of Coleridge saying the problem with the poetry of his own age was that the poets of the day expressed the most banal thoughts in the most fantastical language. But in George Herbert's poetry the most fantastical almost surreal situations are expressed in simple, strong language. Think of Herbert's "Affliction", and the moment when he is addressing God "what thou wilt do with me / None of my books would show: / I read, and sigh, and wish"—

DAN CHIASSEN: "Wish I were a tree."

ALICE QUINN: "For sure then I should grow / To fruit or shade"—

DAN CHIASSEN: "To fruit or shade/ At least some bird would trust her household to me."

ALICE QUINN: "And I would be just."

DAN CHIASSEN: That's one of the most amazing moments in Herbert. I mean, sentence is so painful at that moment that he just wishes he were a tree. That's a pretty desperate wish it seems to me.

ALICE QUINN: Dennis Nurkse says of Herbert's poems, and of great poems in general, that they show us how much poetry is a suppressed art. I really feel that's true as we go back and we read poems over and over and memorize them and they continue to possess an obdurate mystery. James Fenton sometimes jokes about adamant interpretative analysis. He'll read a poem and then he'll read some absolutely cockamamie, hugely confident assertion about it. Billy Collins has a riff that begins something like this: I'm Mr. Nichols here in room 413 and we'll talk today about what Emily Dickinson was *trying* to say in her poem. Anyhow, maybe we could talk for a moment about humor in poetry, because you said something fantastic in that interview about humor's use as a method of dismantling the relationship between the reader and the poet, the effect of which was to draw the reader immediately closer.

DAN CHIASSEN: I think humor is often thought of as a theatrical gesture, which would be a distancing gesture, something that you would do in order

to be, I don't know. It seems to me kind of an alternate form of confessing, a way of bringing the reader closer, actually, and making the reader collaborate. When you tell a joke you actively watch for the response of your interlocutor and so the joke isn't complete until someone laughs. If no one laughs then the joke will not be told again. I don't want to be hilarious, I really don't. I do feel that, it's very simple and straightforward and it's probably not anybody's poetics but mine, getting as much of the social person into my poetic voice as possible. It's kind of mattered to me in life to be slightly funny, again not uproarious, but it's sort of mattered to me and so I think that should be in the poems. I will say that my first book, I'm not against it or anything, but I think it could have been a little bit more lighthearted, actually.

ALICE QUINN: Has O'Hara meant anything to you?

DAN CHIASSEN: Oh, so much. I'm teaching O'Hara now

ALICE QUINN: He's a major Stevens admirer, too.

DAN CHIASSEN: Yeah, I'm teaching a course on the New York school. It's really on John Ashbery but we pass through the New York school, and the others. It's very hazardous because you teach O'Hara and everyone loves O'Hara, and then you teach Schuyler and everybody loves Schuyler, it's unbelievable, and Koch is very charming, everyone loves Koch. Then you get to John Ashbery and it's really hard, but he's the best of those poets, he is, so we need to develop strategies for reading him that don't depend on the slightly secondary traits of the other three great poets, which would have to do with charm, immediacy, heartbreak and so on. (That's only their immediate appeal, of course; they deepen. But that is their immediate appeal.) But, yes, O'Hara means a lot to me though probably I'm the least O'Hara-like person who's ever walked the earth, and I fully expect that if I were at the Cedar Tavern with O'Hara tonight he would not give me the time of day. That's exactly the response you have to O'Hara, you wonder what he would have thought of you.

ALICE QUINN: Whether your charm would work on him?

DAN CHIASSEN: Yeah, you just wonder would he have liked me. I think about

that a lot with O'Hara and also with Robert Lowell, a poet that none of you like.

ALICE QUINN: Yes, but you write very beautifully about him as a figure of unabashed ambition and seriousness, learnedness.

DAN CHIASSON: Yes, the only pitch I have on Lowell is that he's a much more complex poet in relation to the self than he is often given credit for. "Skunk Hour" which is the famous Robert Lowell poem that you could use in order to indict him for all kinds of egocentrism and narcissism is actually almost entirely quotation. Almost every single line in that poem is a quotation either from a literary text, like Milton, or something somebody said to him. It's postmodern pastiche, it really is. I could say more, but...