

New Works Review Interview

with Don Schofield

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NWR: What first moved you to write poetry? Did the influence come from your parents, friends, school, community, reading (or as a reaction to all of the above)?

DS: My parents, inadvertently, through the trauma they caused in raising me, the confusion and anger they left me with. The pain of my first divorce. The mindscapes that LSD and marijuana opened up in me. Then going deeper into those spaces through discovering reading, first prose—Hesse, Dostoyevsky, Camus, Vonnegut, Kesey—then poetry—South American and Spanish, Chinese and Japanese, Eastern European, Greek (Homer to Ritsos), and later, while in graduate school, the modernists Eliot, Pound and Williams, and post-war Americans such as Roethke and Bishop. Studying mythology and the creative process. But most of all having the good fortune to find brilliant teachers, like Dennis Schmitz and Richard Hugo, who helped me see that writing poetry can be a means to explore personal experience, repair some of the psychic damage we so often come into adulthood with, and, through cultivating an inner life, make intermittent contact with the sacred and eternal.

NWR: Were your early influences the classic European and American poets, like Donne, Shelley, Whitman, and Dickinson, or did you turn to 20th-century poets for inspiration?

DS: As I suggest above, my earliest writing influences (besides the work of my teachers) were poems in translation, contemporary and classical. Yes, I read the American canon, but I tended to come to it through the work of foreign poets, especially those on the periphery of their own culture. However strange the links may seem, it was Pablo Neruda who led me to Whitman, Zbigniew Herbert who led me to Williams and Homer who led me to Pound. The poems of these outsiders, however dimmed by translation, compelled me to write because to me they had more gravity and a greater sense of history than the work of their American counterparts.

And so, browsing in a Berkeley bookshop in my late twenties, I found a small collection by the modern Greek poet George Seferis, whose work would change my life. Our backgrounds, as I learned later, were completely different—he an exile from Asia Minor who lived through most of the catastrophes that beset his people in the twentieth century, including World War I, World War II, the Nazi Occupation and the ensuing Greek civil war, and the disastrous rule of the Greek Junta; and I the product of Catholic schools and a fragmented California upbringing. But the experience of loss and displacement I found in his poems resonated deep inside me. The barren,

sun-drenched landscapes he described matched the memory-charged landscapes of my childhood years in Fresno. The shepherds, farmers and fishermen in his poems, with their fishing nets, wine, wheat and olives, seemed to rise out of the myth-charged scriptures I'd read in school. I was so moved by his poetry that, in the late '70s, I decided to visit Greece.

And when I returned to California I no longer fitted in. I had felt a greater sense of belonging in Greece than I ever did in America. So, in 1980 I went back to Seferis' country, to immerse myself in his language and culture (or so I told myself). Now, after 26 years, I'm a citizen of his country, I speak his language and partake of his literary tradition. Such was the influence of one poet.

NWR: Which contemporary poets have published work that you most respect? Why?

DS: These days I tend to turn to those who write about the world I know, Greece, poets such as Jack Gilbert (probably the best poet writing in America today), Linda Gregg, A. E. Stallings and Michael Waters. I also admire the work of C. K. Williams tremendously. Why these poets? Gilbert because of the clarity and concreteness of the imagery in his poems, their depth and directness, the way they so often rise out of the experience of solitude and elevate our ability to genuinely feel over more sophisticated, intellectual concerns. Gregg, again for the clarity and appreciation of solitude

in her poems, the way she uses the concrete to open up spaces resonating with the sacred. Stallings for her deftness with form, her wit and her feel for the way myth and the contemporary world interact. Waters for the depth of emotion his poems express, the sense of loss they often convey, especially when reflecting on relationships. Williams for his compassion, the range and depth of emotion his poems explore, the way memory and the intellect are sometimes adversaries, sometimes partners in those explorations.

But as a reader of Greek, I also turn to modern Greek poets for sustenance. To Cavafy for the way he embeds the personal into a larger narrative, his music (not yet captured adequately in English), his compassion for the victims of history, and for the way he merges solitude, memory and the erotic. Seferis for the reasons I identify above. Sikelianos for the way he joins the Christian to the archaic and infuses both with palpable longing and loss. Elytis for his erotic energy. Ritsos for his enigmatic simplicity and the way his poems subvert classical narratives. Dimoula for her syntactical genius and the sense of urgency those twists and turns often communicate. And Fokas for the way he blends ritual with routine and the everyday world.

NWR: What are the chief concerns that are reflected in your poetry?

DS: The poems featured here in *New Works Review* all come from my latest ms., *Before Kodachrome*, which focuses on my relationship with my parents,

each of whom abandoned me at different times in my early childhood, and on the years I lived with a foster family in Fresno. It's a memoir of sorts. So, as the title suggests, the main concern of the collection is memory, those mental snapshots from our past that stay with us our whole lives and shape who we are, our hopes and fears. I'm also working a lot in this collection with narrative free verse, consciously invoking the healing power of narrative as I look back on the traumas I experienced at the hands of those who raised me. Finally, as in my first book, *Approximately Paradise*, I'm concerned with place, or, more precisely, two places, the Greece of my adult years and the California of my childhood. But in *Before Kodachrome* the grounds get reversed: California is foregrounded while Greece is shifted to the background, framing the events that comprise this memoir and providing a multifaceted context through which to consider what happened back then, why, and to what end.

NWR: What are your plans for your poetry? Are there any long-range projects you are currently working on?

DS: Five years ago, when I started writing the poems that comprise *Before Kodachrome*, I never thought I'd dwell so long on childhood. I knew I wanted to do a whole book of poems rising out of the memory of those early events, but I never thought I'd stay so long or go so deep. Nor did I expect narrative to take over or that the poems would get longer and longer as the collection

progressed. So now I'm looking forward to coming back to the present. Since I first started writing those poems, I've gone through a divorce, lost a teaching job I had held for over 20 years, moved to a new city (Thessaloniki), found work in a new school, and found love with Litsa, the woman I've been with for almost three years now. Those events, and the emotional currents rippling through them, need attending to, so I'm eager to immerse myself in the present and see what poems might come. I also want to try my hand at more traditional forms. And I'm now ready to break up the narrative, to explore what happens when story is disrupted, or even replaced, by other structuring elements. Who knows where I'll wind up.

Biographical Statement

Don Schofield's poems, essays and translations have appeared in numerous American journals, including *Partisan Review*, *New England Review* and *Poets & Writers*, as well as in journals in Europe and Asia. The recipient of this year's Allen Ginsberg Award, he has also received honors from, among others, the State University of New York, Anhinga Press, Southern California Anthology and Princeton University, where, in 2002, he was a Stanley J. Seeger Writer-in-Residence. His poetry volumes include *Of Dust*, a chapbook from March Street Press (1991); *Approximately Paradise*, a booklength collection (University Press of Florida, 2002); and the anthology *Kindled Terraces: American Poets in Greece* (Truman State University Press,

2004). A resident of Greece for over 25 years, he currently lives in the northern city of Thessaloniki.