



INTERVIEW
with Maurice Manning

Interview with Maurice Manning by Wesley Sexton

Maurice Manning has published five books of poems, the most recent being his *The Gone and The Going Away*. In January he found time to sneak away from his 20 acre Kentucky farm to read several of his newest poems as the first of many authors to visit Butler University under the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writer's Series. During his short stay at Butler, Manning took time to speak with the *Manuscripts* staff.

WS: Writing poetry is a unique process among the creative arts. What attention do you give to that process, and in what ways does it affect your writing?

MM: For several generations now, any poet who talks about the process of writing poetry tends to advocate for the value of that process. It's a famous example, but the poet W.H. Auden said that for him, the subject of his poems was not the source of fascination or attention, but that he gave most of his attention to working out the intricacies of form—the laborious process of composition. I often find myself agreeing with that. For instance, almost every poem I have written in the last several years is in a version of iambic tetrameter (the four-beat line); and about ten years ago, I was drawn to pentameter—the five-beat line. It's like playing a musical instrument or a sport—you do your training: your rote, repetitive scales or you practice your foul shots; and hopefully doing that rote, repetitive work improves your skills and abilities across the board.

So, I was doing this pentameter, and I realized that it seemed awkward to me. That fifth foot was too much in the line – it gave too much weight to the line, and it limited the line for me. Or in some ways, it didn't limit the line enough. I like counterintuitive things. For instance, the pentameter line is an ingenious development because it has five feet, which means it doesn't have

a middle. You can't have a half line and an equal second half line. It has to be asymmetric. The four-beat line can be divided in half, but the counterintuitive part of me likes to have that symmetry and yet resist utilizing it. If that is a way to talk about process, that is part of what I'm thinking about. When I'm writing I'm thinking about the asymmetric properties of a symmetrical line.

WS: You mentioned at the reading you gave at Butler University that you often put arbitrary restraints on yourself, in terms of form. For example, *Bucolics* does not use the word "and," and all of the short, six-line poems in *The Gone and the Going Away* have exactly thirty words. What effect does limiting yourself, in terms of form, have on your writing?

MM: I have had a conventional experience with form. In my first book there are a number of poems that follow the traditional rules of a sonnet. There are another bunch of poems in the first book that borrow forms from other areas: there is a geometric proof, which takes a mathematical form and imports it to poetry. I have enjoyed that—there is a legal brief in there as well.

In the second book, I used blank verse a lot.

In the third book, I was using a heavily enjambed iambic line that resolves over the course of the book into iambic tetrameter, and that was an important formal device for me, because in *Bucolics*, the protagonist is in a one-sided dialogue with God. He begins in frustration and concludes in something approaching redemption or reconciliation in a spiritual sense; and it makes sense (to me at least) to have the metrical resolve.

The fourth book is all in couplets of tetrameter, and to me there is logic there. I tend to think of the couplet as the primary formal unit for narrative, going back in literary tradition. Because all the poems in *The Common Man* are narrative, it made sense to me to utilize this old-fashioned formal tool intended for narrative. Many of the poems for that book are spun out of the world of tall tales and oral tradition, and the couplet seems connected to that tradition as well.

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In the fifth book, there are narrative poems but there are a bunch of poems that are just outbursts or utterances of sound or whimsy—talking animals and stuff like that. Those short poems are built on a stanza that I invented—a six line stanza where each line has five words. The odd numbered lines (1, 3, and 5) begin with an iambic foot; while the even numbered lines (2, 4, and 6) begin with a trochaic foot, so you have an upstairs-downstairs movement among the lines. Then, since it's a numerical end to the line rather than a metrical end, each line has a blunt stop. A friend of mine, who is a great poet and wonderful human being—Brooks Haxton—he very nicely described those short 30-word poems as “Honky-tonkas” and that suits me. I think that's a nice description for those. In those poems, I was very consciously thinking about the stanza as a little room for a poem. What poem can be housed in the parameters of this room? It was a lot of fun to realize that it's almost endless, what you can do within the confines of the form.

In the book that's coming out in about a year, I don't believe I really worked in an official stanza. I think of those poems as stacks of lines. Probably what I worked most with in that book is what might be called knotty syntax. Just seeing how the phrase and the sentence can twist and turn through the tetrameter lines.

WS: It's interesting that you pay so much attention to meter, because your poems often read as if they are being spoken, and I think much of that is due to the fact that there is often a unifying voice or place to your books as a whole. For instance, in *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* we have Lawrence Booth as the speaker throughout the book, and in *A Companion to Owls*, we have Daniel Boone narrating for us. *The Gone and the Going Away* is similarly unified by the focus on place. When you are conceiving of books, how does that principle of unity affect your writing, and at what stage in the writing process does it enter?

MM: It sort of happens along the way. For instance, with *Lawrence Booth*, I had flirted with that material for ten years before I figured out a way to deal with it. I was at graduate school at the University

of Alabama when a light bulb came on, and I just thought one day, “Oh, I’ll have this third person omniscient perspective to be the stage manager for the theatrics of these poems.” And that proved to be valuable, because I could then distance myself from some of the material and see it more objectively, seeing it from a broader and wider scope. Then I could come at it from all sides if I wanted to. But that was 10 years into figuring out how to deal with that material.

The Daniel Boone book is a bit of an exception because I pretty quickly—after writing just a few poems—realized that there was something to relish in trying to embody the voice of Daniel Boone, 200 years after he was around.

In *Bucolics*, I had written 10 or 15 poems in that style before I felt the groove, so to speak. Then I heard the voice of the protagonist, and I better defined the world that that protagonist was inhabiting.

With *The Common Man*—in 2005, I had a month-long writing fellowship to this great place in Scotland, called the Hawthornden International Retreat for Writers. I took it very seriously; I wanted to really work and get a lot done. So I went over there and I assigned myself a monastic duty to write one poem a day. At the end of the month I had 30 poems all in pentameter. I came back home, and a couple of months later I was looking back through the poems and I just shook my head and thought, this is not what I want to be doing. I don’t like these: they’re clearly exercises. They’re not really doing anything other than demonstrating someone trying to write in pentameter. So I’ve not done anything with those poems. But I’ve learned how necessary it was to spend a month failing—to spend a month flailing—not doing the right work. That led me to do the work that I really wanted to be doing, which became that tetrameter line, and the couplets that came up in *The Common Man*. Making mistakes is clearly an important part of the process – sometimes big mistakes.

WS: Sometimes contemporary poetry can be aggressively abstract, and the real world is so far removed from the language that it can

be hard to get a foothold. To your credit, your poems often bring the real world in, and they are (in some ways) more accessible because of that. What drives that kind of writing for you?

MM: There is a fine line between what we think of as abstract and what we think of as concrete or accessible. This is something that may perhaps be a part of one's development, but I found myself more and more interested in approaching that line—veering closer to things that are abstract or uncertain or unclear. I read a poem last night “The Place Unnamed, The Vision Unclear,” and I don't think the poem is abstract. I wasn't trying to write an abstract poem, but it's a concrete poem about an abstract circumstance. That suits me. I'm happy to play with the see-saw between abstraction and verifiable reality. I love that, actually, and increasingly I've come to appreciate that in other forms of art—especially painting. I haven't seen it yet, because where we live in Kentucky there is no fancy movie theater, but there is a movie out about the British painter J.M.W. Turner who was a Romantic painter and someone that Wordsworth and Coleridge would have known about and vice-versa. He is a terrific painter because he paints these large-scale scenes of things that aren't quite defined. In the English countryside, which is where he set a lot of his paintings, fog and mist and cloud are always infringing on the concrete things in the painting, so it's a nice mix of fuzzy uncertainty and minute certainty. I'm not an art historian, so I'm searching for a way to describe this, but I really enjoy that. I understand it. I think that is one of the realms that art needs to address—that line between things we know for certain and things that are always shrouded in uncertainty, and how often the two are right next to each other and interfused with each other. Those are rich moments in life, and things that keep us thinking, hopefully.

WS: Another thing your poems seem to be saying is that, in some way, nature gives rise to the imagination. I'm curious about how you feel nature has affected you creatively.

MM: I think nature is the great analog for the human imagination. If you want to understand the human imagination, go out in the

woods. Go walk by a stream, get lost, and be amazed by the natural world. It appears to be spontaneous. It appears to be completely organic and unplanned, and yet at a biological level, trees and plants follow a process. They have a biological design that informs their growth, reproduction, lifespan, etc.

I think that is useful when thinking about the human imagination. There is a wildness and a freedom—an organic quality—to the imagination, and yet you have to steer it. You have to tend it, or prune it. You have to guide it in some way or else what comes out of it doesn't have much meaning.

WS: Who are some of your favorite poets to read these days?

MM: Just recently I was at a poetry festival in Palm Beach, Florida, which I thoroughly enjoyed, and while I was there I got to meet a poet that I've long admired, named Robert Wrigley. I bought a book of his that I did not have previously and I've really been enjoying that. I've read him for years, but have gained a newfound attention for his poetry—stuff that is up my alley, so to speak. There are a lot of contemporary poets whose work I will always admire and respect—some who are coming to Butler this semester. Louis Glück and Ellen Bryant Voigt especially are poets that I admire, and they are mentors in their way. I'm really fond of Claudia Emerson, who passed away in the fall. Alan Shapiro, Andrew Hudgins, Kay Ryan, Natasha Trethewey, my former colleague Ross Gay. There are a lot of great poets out there right now.

I probably spend more of my reading time with poets who are no longer on the face of the Earth, and that's just owing to my education. When I was in college the focus was not on contemporary literature. The focus was on experiencing literature from a historical perspective, and that just took root in me. I've spent a lot of time with the Romantics, and any poet who had a pastoral inkling. I spend a lot of time with Shakespeare. I've come increasingly to believe that all literature (if there is an audience for it) requires some dramatic element. I spend a lot of time with Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Gerard Manley Hopkins—always I go to Hopkins. In fact, yesterday in one of

my classes at Transylvania, we were singing the praises of Hopkins for enlivening the language and reviving its Anglo-Saxon roots.

Recently I've been reading a lot of Edward Thomas, who we sometimes think of as a WWI poet—he was killed in the war—but he wrote about more than the war. He was a real craftsman, and there is a lot to learn and admire in his work.

WS: It's interesting that you mention the drama of literature, because I've heard you speak about that in interviews before, and I personally see that inclination toward drama in *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions*, for example. I'm just curious how that tendency toward drama affects the way you write and think about poems.

MM: I think one of the paradoxes and challenges of writing a poem that's going to reach somebody else, is that you are using a two-dimensional medium (words written on a flat page) to create a three-dimensional effect. You want to use these abstract symbols on a flat page to render a world that the reader can experience in three dimensions – a space where things really are; where there's light, and shadow created by the light and an object in the space, and there's a voice in there that actually sounds like something. There is a mind in there that is actually thinking something, and there is a little drama in there working itself out. It might just be a tiny little movement of a branch floating in the wind up and down, and that's it. Or it might be something of apparently greater consequence. I tend to appreciate — especially here lately — creating that dramatic space where the tiniest little thing happens, and implying that no matter what, that is of consequence.