



INTERVIEW WITH

*Dean Young*

**Dean Young** has authored twelve books of poetry, his most recent contribution being a collection of new and old poems entitled *Bender*. His book *Falling Higher* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. Young has served as the William Livingston Chair of Poetry at the University of Texas in Austin since 2008.

**Wesley Sexton:** *What first drew you to Surrealism as an artistic movement?*

**Dean Young:** When I was a kid my parents took me to Washington D.C. and in the National Gallery there is a painting by Salvador Dali which really impressed me because it was so strange. Then, I went to the library and got a book of his paintings. Their strangeness and dreamlike qualities really impressed me, and that's how I found out about Surrealism. Then, I went to the library again and got the *Manifestos on Surrealism* by André Breton. I read them when I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and that really opened it up for me.

**WS:** *Surrealism is so much about our thoughts—our imaginations, and poetry in the last fifty or so years seems to have shifted from trying to understand the world to trying to understand ourselves, and the way we interact with the world. How do you think those two impulses overlap?*

**DY:** The self is a manifestation of the world as much as DY world is a manifestation of the self, so to see the self as a phenomenon in the world makes a lot of sense.

**WS:** *What do you draw from the New York School?*

**DY:** With Koch particularly, his poems are fun. There is

almost no suffering in Kenneth Koch's work. There is a sheer joy of the medium of poetry—of making poems—and they are free of the burden of seriousness. That's true of Frank O'Hara and John Ashberry too to some extent. Freedom of seriousness isn't just about being funny. It's also about having a kind of dexterity in what the poem can do – what directions it can follow. Ashberry in particular is extraordinary in his resources of distraction and surprise and the beauty of motion in the poem. It follows a kind of musicality that doesn't seem bound to sensible argument.

**WS:** *About these poems that lack seriousness, some people might say, "Well, what's the point?" How would you answer that question?*

**DY:** What do they mean by point? What are you looking for? You have a preconceived notion of the poem's destination, or what a poem should be about. From my perspective, that's obviously very limiting because you can't appreciate it as much.

**WS:** *Traditionally poems are thought to bring us toward some kind of discovery or epiphany. How else can we think about poetry without binding it to this obligation of discovery or insight?*

**DY:** One of the most common ways is to think about it as poetry itself. A corollary of that is to think about the ways in which meaning is structured, and made. One of the ways of making that apparent is to resist it – to not make meaning in ways that are conventionally expected or understood. Poetry can be thought of as in resistance to conventional ways of thinking.

**WS:** *In The Art of Recklessness you talk about how poetry can restore a level of primitiveness to society. What do you see as the*

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*value of primitivism?*

**DY:** It gets us back to the raw state of being and desire and physicality and biology and facts of our existence, which are not things that should necessarily be ignored or thought of as detrimental to life. I think we have a tendency to lose contact with the earth—with our being—in our desire to become more civilized. It gets us back to the first feelings of awe and appreciation and fear and love that strike me as being vital to our existence—to human friendship.

**WS:** *I wonder if you thought about how technology plays a role in that?*

**DY:** I'm very suspicious of technology. It's wonderful. For one thing, it's brought music into our lives in ways that were impossible 100 years ago. I listen to recorded music almost constantly, and it's a big part of my life. But technology also mitigates. Every experience it gives us is a mitigated experience. You also have to deal with the environmental impact of technology.

**WS:** *Do you think music and poetry function in similar ways?*

**DY:** Music is something that has a kind of meaning—we take a kind of experience from it—which isn't narrative, which isn't argumentative. It doesn't have a point. It's an experience that in and of itself is sufficient. It doesn't refer to anything, and that is an inspiration to me because poetry can have similar possibilities.

**WS:** *So that it creates its own reality without necessarily explaining it?*

**DY:** Yeah, it's not obliged to make sense.

**WS:** *I've often found that if some of my favorite lyrics are spoken or even read on the page, they become incredibly underwhelming. Do you have any thoughts as to why that is?*

**DY:** It's just because the music itself has so much power. I'll listen to songs for years before I even begin to hear what the lyrics are saying. It's not that important to me. I love vocal music, but the content of the language is always a distant second to what is happening in the music.

**WS:** *Also from The Art of Recklessness, in the beginning you say something like "if everyone in the world decided to write a poem today, we can be sure nothing would be made worse." It's understated there, but what do you see as the value of writing poetry.*

**DY:** One of the things is it's not materialistic. I think it helps people get in touch with something that is beyond them—something beyond their particular daily concerns—and also much bigger than they are. Something that can inspire awe and appreciation and surprise. And it's free. You make yourself open to it and it comes, and it connects you to this huge history of people who have been writing poems for thousands of years.

**WS:** *In Bender there are many odes. What draws you to that form?*

**DY:** It's that the ode is the poem of praise. We often expect a poem to be a poem of complaint or woe, so the ode attracted me as a way of doing something different and not being obliged to sorrow.

**WS:** *Writing seems to come so naturally to you. Have you struggled at all with teaching?*

**DY:** Well, teaching is really demanding. It takes a lot of time. It's really exhausting, but because it's so woven into my life—the way writing is woven into my life—I'm not sure what has taught me what. I'm sure of learned things about teaching from my writing, thinking about what someone could say to me that would be useful, and then trying to create an environment where that can happen in class. That's how my writing has influenced my teaching.

My teaching makes me susceptible to the work of young poets. Their concerns and their practices and their discoveries have influence on my work. I want it to. I want to be influenced by as many people as possible.

**WS:** *You've spoken about how conformity can be dangerous to poetry, but reading and being influenced by other writers is a form of that. Do you have a feeling about what the difference is?*

**DY:** Reading poems makes people want to write poems. Some of the biggest compliments I've ever receive about things I've written are that someone has said they read my poem and it made them want to write a poem. Poetry defies the law of supply and demand. Its value is not diminished by the amount available. The more poetry there is, the more poetry there is. There is no limit. Poetry is never saying no to poetry.

**WS:** *Is there a danger of being too closely influenced by a poet?*

**DY:** Probably, and then it's just a question of steering the other direction. Read something else—something very different. You need an antidote.

**WS:** *How do you feel that the Romantic poets have influenced your work?*

**DY:** The difference of 100 years in terms of my attitude

toward poetry is absolute and unassailable. It's harder for us to feel contact with poets the further we go back in time. The older I get the less remote 100 years seems to me. I feel pretty direct contact with Keats and Wordsworth. I think it's vital to develop a connection to poetry that is a connection beyond the poets of your era—to develop what Eliot calls a “historical sense.” It occurs throughout life. It's not like some people ever finish. Don't feel guilty at any particular time about not having yet read a poet, because it's perpetually in development. But I think everyone should read poets from every era.

**WS:** *Your poems don't seem very concerned with narrative. Why do you think that is?*

**DY:** Narrative is just one way of ordering experience. It's gotten to be the dominant way of ordering experience. We have movies and television, but we also have music, which isn't necessarily narrative. I am not that interested in narrative, maybe because it is the dominant way of ordering experience. In poetry I want to see what other ways I can find.

**WS:** *There is certainly some narrative in your poems though. You can often say something happened or you can identify a subject at least. Do you have any thoughts about how narrative intersects with imagination in your poetry?*

**DY:** It has to do with process and with how association is central to the process. I am not being held to any kind of logical expectation. That is where Surrealism influences me most.

**WS:** *What value does the association hold for you?*

**DY:** It creates new types of connections, which forms

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meaning because meaning is connection.

**WS:** *Sometimes our mind can form connections that only make sense because of the imagination, but that doesn't make the connection any less real.*

**DY:** I completely agree.