

OUR WHITMAN OF AMBIVALENCE:  
CAMPBELL McGRATH ON POLITICS, NOSTALGIA, AND  
CARPENTRY

*"Working as a carpenter . . . doesn't just teach you to hammer nails, it gives you insight into the lives of everyone who has ever hammered a nail."*

America is too large to hold in one's mind. Its competing, contradicting, and coexisting ideologies are as variegated as its geographic expanses. Still, there have been writers whose work seems to capture in snapshots the complexities of its spirit, even if that snapshot's hurried blur only hints toward something more definite, something still too expansive. These writers awaken in us the moments in which our daily lives and the greater world seem to constellate and make sense. But this "making sense" results in terror or futility as often as it elates and charges us with new energy. In fact, our own experience of our world is more often the blur than the clear image—we spend more time in longing than we do in knowing. Somehow, Campbell McGrath—poet, documentarian, historian—holds America in his mind and, through his stories and music and humor, gives us back our daily experience more clearly, more connected to the larger scene of America—its places, history and ideologies.

Author of ten books of poetry, Campbell McGrath has been honored with the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Award," among many other prestigious awards.

The following interview took place over email early this year.

**Vincent Guerra: There seems to have been a resurgence of political poetry in the past few years, defined perhaps as poetry that explicitly addresses social injustice. Why do you think writers feel a new sense of permission in this regard? Or perhaps a better question would be, why has this always been a concern of yours?**

Campbell McGrath: Political poetry doesn't necessarily address social injustice—in a perfect society political poetry would still be written, but there'd be no injustice to report upon. Since I'm a member of this society, no such luck. My point is: my primary instinct or concern is to write about my society—that comes first—and since politics both just and unjust are a salient part of that world, so it falls under my mandate. I am a documentarian of my society, my culture, my world, and politics is at times in the forefront of my poetic concerns, at other times off in the distant background.

**VG: Your work seems interested in avoiding nostalgia for a pre-industrial era, a common complaint against those who oppose capitalism. How do you find yourself negotiating a critique of the present state of the world without expressing nostalgia for the past? Is this possible?**

CM: I'm not opposed to capitalism, I'm opposed to greed. Capitalism gives license to greed, so they often go together, but not necessarily. There could be such a thing as "enlightened capitalism" and I'd be all for it. Maybe we should all move to Norway. No offense to previous economic systems, but capitalism is so vastly more productive that it's not much of a contest. Fernand Braudel, for instance, who was a Marxist, demonstrates that capitalism has been like a "rocket engine" for the material betterment of mankind. That's the upside, all the material stuff it begets. The bad side is the lack of a moral code, the alienation it wreaks, and the fact that the greedy, unenlightened version of capitalism seems to be the only model America is interested

in these days. So, nostalgia? For a “simpler world”? Like, living in a hut, shooting gazelles with arrows? Not for me, though I wish the capitalist world did not insist on exterminating such cultures in its race to global domination.

**VG: Of your most recent collection, *Seven Notebooks*, one reviewer has said that your work “thrives on [your] dissatisfaction with the world.” Yet, one also gets the sense, through the often lush language and the encyclopedic inclusiveness of your poems, that your work thrives, too, on a love of the world – could you talk about this apparent tension?**

CM: I describe myself, in “The Bob Hope Poem,” as “a veritable Whitman of ambivalence,” which I think says it all. Keeping in mind that ambivalence does not mean not to care either way, but to care both ways.

**VG: Your author’s notes often publicize your diverse travel/living and employment experience. Young writers are often told to go experience the world or to learn a skill as part of their training. What is your advice to young writers?**

CM: Can there be any argument about the value of experiencing the world – for anyone, but especially for a writer? Working as a carpenter, say, doesn’t just teach you to hammer nails, it gives you insight into the lives of everyone who has ever hammered a nail, insight into the pleasures and annoyances of working a craft, any kind of craft. Visiting and living in other cultures is especially vital for Americans, I think, as there’s such a myopic world view in the country, based not so much on malice as on ignorance. As a young writer you need to write as much as you can – put in as many hours working on your craft; but outside those hours, the broader your world experience the better, in my opinion. Especially if you end up in academia, which is

a very narrow field.

**VG: What are you currently working on?**

CM: Since *Seven Notebooks* I've published a book-length narrative poem about the American west, *Shannon: A Poem of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. I'll have a book of "regular" poems coming out in 2012, and after that I've got another long project book in the works, 100 poems about the 20th Century, one poem per year, in the voices of various historical figures.

**VG: Who are you reading right now? Anything you would like to recommend?**

CM: Because of the historical project I'm involved with, I've been reading lots of biographies, history books, nonfiction of various kinds. But here are a couple recommendations: in fiction, *Divisadero*, by Michael Ondaatje; in nonfiction, *The Possessed*, by Elif Batuman; and in contemporary poetry, I've been reading and enjoying the work of Tracy K. Smith and Peter O'Leary. ■