

## DAVID WAGONER'S POETRY OF INSTRUCTION

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Instructing and edifying are not the tasks in which contemporary poets like to openly engage. Nor does the reading public seem to expect them too. The adjective "didactic" applied to poetry has virtually come to mean "inferior", and poets object to it with as much ferocity as they oppose being labeled "nature poets". In this respect, David Wagoner is a curious exception. This sixty-year old American poet from Seattle has made instruction one of his principal modes of expression. So many of his poems are unabashedly didactic (including his best and the most frequently anthologized ones) that instruction can be said to have become Wagoner's poetic trademark. The poet employed the instructional voice for the first time over twenty-five years ago in a poem still regarded as one of his best "A Guide to Dungeness Spit" (*The Nesting Ground*, 1963), and ever since he has been experimenting with it, most notably and most successfully in two volumes published in the 1970's, *New Poems* (1976) and *In Broken Country* (1979). Though in the following years and volumes his interest in the possibilities of the instructional voice as a poetic medium apparently diminished, he never altogether lost it and isolated instructional poems are still to be found in his more recent collections.

When a poet assumes a distrusted stance or borrows a distrusted voice, he cannot possibly hope for success unless he accomplishes one of two feats: he must either revitalize the voice and make it credible again or, by deliberately experimenting with his medium, must reveal its as yet unrealized potential or liabilities. Wagoner has accomplished both. His poems, on the one hand, return to the best traditions of didactic poetry, ignoring, as it were, its meager contemporary reputation, to offer, in all seriousness, instruction on, for example, how to start a fire in the rain or how to rescue a drowning person. The attraction of these poems is related to the shock the reader experiences as he is confronted with poetry that openly tries to teach him something useful

and which, in the process, opens up his eyes to what a critic called “the glamor of utility”.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, these poems of instruction are at the same time poems about instruction and about the nature of the instructive voice. They are in particular Wagoner’s commentary on what, for lack of a better term, will be referred here to as the VOI – the Voice of Instruction. The VOI is among the most characteristic voices of American reality, one that endlessly addresses the American ear from TV screens, advice columns, manuals, guidebooks, junk mail, radio commercials. Its familiar drone provides a background to Wagoner’s poems against which they acquire additional dimension. They become studies in the dangers of instructing. They reveal the simplifications and frauds that teaching may involve, bare its tricks and limitations. They question the utility of instruction at moments of crisis and disclose the confusion of instructors. Ultimately, Wagoner’s instructional poems discredit the principle of instruction itself.

Though Wagoner offers advice on a variety of topics ranging from singing to fortune telling, most of his instructional poems deal with ways of surviving in the wilderness. His wilderness instruction has an unforgettable flavor. The poems, written in plain, colloquial American English, hard headed and informative, might – if disguised as prose – be mistaken for guidebook entries. They are a compendium of sound wilderness advice, of valuable information memorably phrased as all good lessons should be. At his instructional best Wagoner is unrivaled. To a hiker who has to sleep a cold night in the woods, he says,

Don’t try to stay awake through the night afraid of freezing.  
The bottom of your mind knows all about zero.  
It will turn you over  
And shake you till you waken.<sup>2</sup>

To a tracker his message is,

If you come to running water, head upstream.  
Everything human  
Climbs as it runs away and goes to ground later.  
What tries to escape you  
Will count on you to suffer discouragement. (CP 253)

And for a backpacker suddenly confronted with a grizzly Wagoner has a word of advice together with an explanation. Remember, he says, that

your upright posture...  
In his world, like a down-swayed head and humped shoulders,  
Is a standing offer to fight for territory  
And a mate to go with it.  
Gaping and staring directly are as risky as running. (CP 250)

There is a delight in these poems with factual information about how things work, why they work the way they do, and how the knowledge can be used to one’s advantage. It is the same kind of delight that one senses move so many American authors: Hemingway as he excitedly talks of the technicalities of fishing, Twain as he explains the tricks of river navigation, most obviously Thoreau when he meticulously records facts regardless of whether or not they promise to “flower into truth”. In Wagoner’s poems this delight is combined with an urge to share knowledge and experience, an urge which possibly echoes the excitement the poet must have felt when, at the relatively late age of thirty five, he was first introduced to real wilderness and began to learn its ways. Only novices who, like himself once, needed no more than five minutes to get lost in the woods, and who experienced the shock of realizing their utter ignorance of necessary information, will speak about knowledge of facts with just as much enthusiasm and respect.<sup>3</sup>

In some poems the urge Wagoner feels to communicate a few survival tips virtually suppresses his interest in anything but the information itself. As he excitedly concentrates on facts, he does not seem to care to exploit the possible metaphoric significance of the information he is offering. However, this is not the case with the best of his instructional poetry. The best poems balance impressively between wilderness expertise and an exploration of its wider implications, and thus teach us not only how to travel through the real woods or deserts but through life as well. Perhaps the most remarkable of Wagoner’s achievements in those best poems is that they talk simultaneously of two very different realms of human experience seemingly without straining in a language that remains strikingly plain.<sup>4</sup> The poet’s rare skill does not lie in his ability to devise original metaphors with which to convincingly bring the two realms together but in his ability to reveal that such metaphors already exist in our language as we use it daily and unselfconsciously. This is why upon the first reading of some of Wagoner’s poems, one may feel uncertain about which is their literal and which the metaphorical meaning. “Missing the Trail” from *New Poems* (1976) might serve here as an illustration.

Only a moment ago you were thinking about something  
Different, the sky or yesterday or the wind,

<sup>1</sup> R. W. Flint, “At Home in the Seventies”, *Parnassus*, VIII, No. 2, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> David Wagoner, *Collected Poems 1956-1976* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 54. All future references will be to this and to the following editions of Wagoner’s books of poetry: *In Broken Country* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), abbreviated BC; *Landfall* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), abbr. L.

<sup>3</sup> See Joe David Bellamy’s interview with Wagoner in *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> Wagoner referred to this as the achievement of his poetry that pleases him most in Ron McFarland’s, “An Epistolary Interview with David Wagoner”, *The Slackwater Review* (special issue, 1981), p. 15.

But suddenly its yourself  
 Alone, strictly alone, having taken a wrong turn  
 Somewhere behind you, having missed the trail,  
 Bewildered, now uncertain  
 Whether to turn back, bear left or right, or flounder ahead  
 Stubbornly, breaking new ground out of pride or panic,  
 Or to raise your voice  
 Out of fear that screaming is the only universal language. (CP 254)

More than anything else it is the title of the poem and the fact that Wagoner placed it in a series of other wilderness poems that make these lines read as a commentary on a hiker's misfortune. But without the title or with a different one, and in a different neighbourhood, the very same lines might quite naturally be responded to as describing an emotional condition, the instant of discovery of one's emotional isolation and the feeling of panic that follows. The few expressions which minimally tip the scales in favor of placing the event in a wilderness context – "taking a wrong turn", "missed the trail" – to a reader unaware of the poem's title would sound as rather unobtrusive, though not very original, metaphors. By way of such linguistic magic, Wagoner argues his point that our civilized lives and our wilderness experiences can be seen as each other's metaphors. Moreover, he indicates that the idea is not original with him; he shows it to be an insight coded in our daily language, however unaware of the fact we may be. Once this is said, wilderness instruction in his poetry becomes instruction in living, and vice versa, attitudes and beliefs by which we daily live are tested for their utility when surviving in the woods is at stake.

For the literal and for the metaphorical traveller, Wagoner has the identical sounding primary instruction: "Distrust instruction". Employing the instructional mode almost to excess and using it to communicate to the reader bits of wisdom that he obviously treasures, the poet questions the value and utility of instruction. At moments of crisis, whether in the woods or out of them, he argues, most of the instruction we have received and internalized, most of what our teachers, preachers, and guides have ever taught us, almost as a matter of course turns out not to work. In the woods, where survival may be at stake, the uselessness of well remembered lessons in the time of trouble is revealed only more dramatically. There, reactions bred into individuals, stock responses, and inherited beliefs repeatedly discredit themselves. The lead to pathetic gestures and choices that may turn out to be suicidal. Therefore, surviving in the wilderness, Wagoner shows in his poems, too often depends not on remembering but on forgetting what we were once taught.

A high premium may be put on courage and dignified behavior, but when one is in the woods and face to face with a bear "to try for dominance or moral authority" means only to court disaster. "Move off", Wagoner recommends instead, "yielding the forest floor as carefully as your honor". (CP 250)

Similarly, to act upon the deeply internalized revulsion for dirt when waist deep on a marsh means to sink even deeper. The only chance one has to get out is to lie down in the stinking muck and wait till one's legs emerge. Surviving in the desert may mean having to scavenge. And scavenging, Wagoner claims in "Living off the Land", is a problem that is cultural in the first place and only then physiological. After all, he says, "deadness of flesh is a relative notion". (BC 99) To scavenge means to overcome revulsion, "the gripping of your guts at the half thought of setting for carrion like vultures" (BC 99), but the nauseating feeling is possibly less a matter of fear that carrion will taste foul or will make one sick, than of one's awareness that the act is disapproved of by culture. The wish to survive must be balanced against a culturally transmitted attitude that under the circumstances appears untenable.

The wilderness functions in Wagoner's poems as a testing ground where all our assumed knowledge – our concepts, attitudes, language, even the facts of science – come under the harshest scrutiny and distressingly often prove to be inaccurate, false, or simply useless. Upon the wilderness testing ground the poet discloses the limits of applicability of many truths and attitudes by which we were instructed to live and act. There, such formulas as stand upright, be courageous, don't give up, persevere, act honorably too often offer no clues to handling the dangerous unexpected. By implication their utility out of the woods is similarly limited. Out there, a few hours without food will demonstrate to any individual that he is "omnivorous in the name only". (BC 99) One ride on a trail horse should cure even a relatively experienced rider of any illusions he might have about human control over anything of any significance. Even information considered objective and therefore reliable, such as of facts of physics or geometry, is likely to turn out invalid and inoperative in the wilderness. On a rock strewn plain "the shortest distance between two points doesn't exist" Wagoner remarks in "Walking in Broken Country". (BC 91) "Straight lines are an abstraction, an ideal. Not even to be hoped for". (BC 91) And this is so not only because a traveller in the desert cannot follow anything like a straight route to his point of destination when boulders or canyons obstruct the way, but also because in the desert his judgement of what is straight or curved, near or distant, cannot be relied upon and, in fact, is likely to be incorrect. In the clear, hot desert air "light shifts, fidgets, and veers in ways clearly beyond you/Confusing its weights and measurements with your own/which are far simpler". (CP 255) Thus facts of physics become lies in the wilderness, and conversely, what are lies to physics in the wilderness become truths. Optics may give away mirages yet to an exhausted and thirsty traveller they are more than real, a concrete problem – even if physically nonexistent – that has to be confronted and coped with.

Surprises of the wilderness, much like the unforeseeable predicaments of life, may invalidate even the soundest of instruction given in the best of faith.

But whether an entirely honest intent is indeed the attitude in which instruction is always given seems more than problematic to the poet. What if instruction is deliberately incomplete? What if the instructor, for reasons of his own, deliberately refrains from articulating the most important? He may, for example, consciously minimize the problems or dangers involved, or raise hopes which he knows to be futile. The very principle of instruction – sharing knowledge and wisdom for the benefit of the person instructed – may be abused.<sup>5</sup>

It should not be surprising that such doubts and questions about the value of instruction are raised by an American. Questioning authority has always been in the American grain. Yet Wagoner's poetry, as has already been mentioned, is also a reaction to a more specific stimulus – the American Voice of Instruction. In its numerous disguises, the VOI never ceases nagging the American ear whispering or shouting into it directions, encouragement, and advice, and offering instruction in almost anything from how to win friends and influence people and how to be a lesbian with class to how to massage one's cat.<sup>6</sup> Although the VOI assumes a rich variety of inflections and tones depending on the goals it strives to achieve and the listeners it intends to reach, there are certain characteristics that it is prone to exhibit under most circumstances. A very brief survey of those might be helpful here to demonstrate the importance of the VOI for Wagoner's poetry.

The Voice of Instruction is characterized in, the first place, by its tone of confidence. No matter what it instructs us in, it sounds buoyantly unhesitant: "Here's something that will make you feel good about the country. The Nissan Pathfinder. It is simply the best combination of power, comfort and durability of any vehicle on the road".<sup>7</sup> As here, the VOI always addresses one personally and directly, and in a manner that is a combination of friendliness and concern.

Your diet should include generous amounts of dark green leafy vegetables like spinach and kale. Or yellow orange fruits and vegetables, like cantaloupe and carrots. So, please, eat these fruits and vegetables. To help support your diet, add Centrum to your daily menu.<sup>8</sup>

Invariably, the VOI is full of sympathy and understanding, always on the listener's side.

You've worked hard to make your lawn and garden beautiful, but the only things coming up are those dirt mounds that announce – *you've got gophers*. You can't surrender to those

<sup>5</sup> Wagoner discusses this in Joe David Bellamy, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>6</sup> Compare: Dale and Dorothy Carnegie, *How To Win Friends and Influence People* (N. Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1981); Alice H. Potter, *How to Be a Lesbian with Class* (Port Washington, N. Y.: Ashley Books, 1987); Alice M. Brock, *How to Massage Your Cat* (N. Y.: Knopf, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Advertisement for the Nissan Pathfinder, *Newsweek*, May 30, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Advertisement for the Centrum Multivitamin Formula, *ibid.*, p. S-15.

rodents. But gas poisons ... would only make you feel like a murderer. Technology's solution is the GoPherIt.<sup>9</sup>

Whenever necessary, the VOI will try to restore or install in the listener his good feeling about himself. Often it will soothe, often resort to flattery. Here are the opening sentences of a manual for parents that is 700 pages long.

You know more than you think you do. Soon you're going to have a baby. ... You wonder whether you're going to know how to do a good job. ... Don't take seriously what the neighbours say. Don't be overawed by what the experts say. Don't be afraid to trust your common sense.<sup>10</sup>

Only when it would be grossly inappropriate, the VOI will forgo its habitual optimism. Otherwise it will cheerfully dispel doubts and play down difficulties, regardless of how legitimate they might be. Not untypical of its boundless optimism might be these words of encouragement to prospective memoir writers.

No matter who you are, where you were born, or where you live you have a story to tell. Your life experiences happened to you only and only you can record them. ... You're saying ... that you're not a writer? You don't need to be. If you can write a letter you can write memoirs. Just pretend you're chatting with a friend.<sup>11</sup>

The VOI promotes a vision of the world where nothing is impossible. Everybody can become a writer and everybody can grow back a shock of hair. Only rarely does it allow for failures, preferring to keep diplomatically silent about them. As instructor, the VOI is patient and forgiving in its crusade for a better world which, it insists, is only round the corner or at your fingertips.

Wagoner is a connoisseur of the Voice. He listens to it as carefully as most people let it go past their ears. It provides him with mottoes for his poems, occasions entire statements, but primarily furnishes a background noise against whose faint, familiar buzz Wagoner's own instruction acquires its fullness. With the VOI audible in the distance, what Wagoner says sounds odd, baffling, and disquieting. His poems do not meet the expectations which familiarity with the VOI raises in the reader. They employ a well known tune to distort it. At the same time, as they depart from the familiar model, they offer a commentary on it. In Wagoner's instructional poems the VOI's characteristics come into focus; its tricks are revealed, simplifications ridiculed, and the voice itself is parodied and discredited.

Sometimes Wagoner does this directly. An example might be his poem "The Last Laugh" from *Landfall* (1981), which is a not entirely bemused commentary on a series of directives taken from Douglas Fairbank's book

<sup>9</sup> Advertisement for the GoPherIt rodent repellent, *The New Yorker*, April 18, 1988, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (N. Y.: Pocket Books, 1977), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Fanny-Maude Evans, *Changing Memories into Memoirs* (N. Y.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1984), p. IX.

*Laugh and Live*, an atrocious though not untypical example of the instructional<sup>12</sup> zeal. The target in the poem is the book's underlying conviction that what it offers must make the instructed person a happier human being. Fairbank's key to happiness is laughing aloud and yielding to impulses, even the apparently ridiculous ones such as a sudden urge to climb a tree or run around the block late at night. By following the directions given in the book, Wagoner brings out all the ridiculousness of its claims and the shallowness of its optimism. Interestingly enough, our own surprise that somebody might respond so literally to instruction reveals, on the one hand, how guardedly we tend to take manual and guidebook wisdom, and on the other, how – knowing this – the instructor may, even as he is offering his advice, *assume* that it will not be followed too closely. The recommended panacea of loud laughing results in nothing but embarrassment on the part of the author and puzzlement in the faces of those who witness his irregular behavior. The search for a tree to climb leads only to an unexpected epiphany of transience “which is no laughing matter”. The midnight jog ends in a realization

Doug,  
Believe me, neither your book  
Nor I seem any better  
Than before I ran around  
My block ...  
And now I stretch out flat  
In the darkness to recover  
In love and sleep and fear  
and anger, some better humor. (L 46-47)

For all its good intentions, *Laugh and Live* offers only an easy escapism. Yielding to the impulse to be spontaneous, unreflexive and care-free cannot make us happy since it cannot do away with that which makes us unhappy and which, as Wagoner claims in the poem, is a part of our condition. Feelings of uneasiness and shame, awareness of death and evil (the jogger in the poem is all the time on a lookout for muggers and burglars) are all a part of reality and cannot be denied by climbing trees or laughing aloud. Good humor, the poet argues, depends upon the good things in life no less than upon acknowledging anger and fear, which the instructive voice of Douglas Fairbanks so lightheartedly dismisses.<sup>13</sup>

Some other features of the VOI are analyzed in two series of poems included in *In Broken Country*. Wagoner comments in them on the VOI's reassuring tone and its tendency to dismiss the doubts which may come to the instructed person's mind, even if those doubts are justifiable or prove the

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., *Laugh and Live* (Boston, Graphic Society, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> For a different interpretation see, Laurence Lieberman, *Unassigned Frequencies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 160-164.

listener's good sense or decency. Thus, for example, in a poem “Cutting Down a Tree” whose tone echoes the VOI's at its most reassuring and confident, the directions include some remarks meant to dispel whatever uneasiness a sensitive individual might feel at felling a living, healthy tree. Having instructed us in how to make the initial steep undercut into the tree trunk, the teaching voice continues:

For practical purposes, your tree is dead  
At that moment, so making your back cut  
(level and higher) shouldn't weigh heavily  
On what may be left of your uneasiness  
At undertaking to saw through living heartwood.  
It isn't your fault, is it? You walked on planks  
All your half-life without thinking  
Anything about it, nailed them, sat on them,  
Pounded them with your fists or burned them ...  
So call out *Timber* and forget all that. (BC 65)

Another poem, “Setting a Snare”, captures the VOI's evasiveness about all those details that might be too unpleasant or too discouraging. The would be snare-setter is informed therefore that, when he comes back to claim the trapped animal, he

will have missed  
The unpleasant details  
which needn't bother us now. (BC 75)

In “Trapline”, another poem in the same series, Wagoner employs the VOI sympathetic speaker who, as he converses with the listener, guesses his thoughts and feelings.

This is a good life,  
Isn't it? – all this  
Fresh air and breathing easy, breathing over and over  
As much as you like, catching your breath  
As many times as you want to. (BC 77)

With the VOI melodies in the background, Wagoner's instruction sounds disturbingly out of tune. Advice as he gives it here does not sound the way one would expect it. The drone is familiar, the elements seem the same and yet the effect startles. The encouragement offered in “Cutting Down a Tree” will free of the sense of guilt only the most careless reader. What is phrased as encouragement is only a reminder that if one does not feel any uneasiness at undertaking the task, one *should*; that there are good reasons to feel guilty when one starts “sowing through the living heartwood” and neither “living” nor “heartwood” are used here incidentally. The more sympathetic the speaker pretends to be, the clearer becomes his ironic intention: every word is carefully chosen to shame the callousness of the “half-life” of those to whom tree equals

timber. Similarly, in "Setting a Snare", while the instructor declares his lack of interest in the unpleasant details, he makes them in fact the poem's focus. But first he lulls the reader with the familiar VOI tones.

Your problem is getting a small game animal  
To trust your world  
(Which he thinks is his) just long enough to be  
Yanked away from it.  
Like you, he's fond of walking old paths and playing  
Safe under cover,  
So framing his trail with wire and a bent sapling  
Hair-triggered by sticks,  
You can offer a passage under a fallen log  
And into a gallows  
More natural-seeming than any common hangman's. (BC 75)

As instruction the first lines hardly promise anything irregular. At first reading their irony is likely to be lost on the VOI conditioned reader. He is made aware of it only upon reaching the words "gallows" and "common hangman" which sound jarringly out of place in the VOI matrix. Before he is bolted by them into the awareness that this time he is reading an instruction with a difference, the parenthesized aside in the third line is likely to look to him as a joke a good-natured huntsman might tell with a wink to encourage a novice. But "gallows" and "hangman" redefine meanings. In their company "Trust your world" becomes bitterly ironic. "Like you he's fond of walking old paths" loses the neutrality of an observation of correspondence between animal and human ways and becomes charged with disapproval recognizing some kind of personality or character where a trapper would like to allow none. The wink is twisted into a contemptuous grimace. The lines that follow immediately after, sarcastic and accusatory, leave no doubt as to the speaker's meaning.

If you're sure the setting  
Seems innocent enough to pass his furtive senses,  
Then make this noose  
Be you in your absence, performing without flinching  
The act of strangling.  
Ideally, when you come back, you will have missed  
The unpleasant details,  
Which needn't bother us now, and will find harmless  
What hangs there and hangs there.  
Out of reach of other animals, it waits  
For you and you alone. (BC 75)

The instructive voice, which as a result of the VOI conditioning could initially be mistaken for friendly, is now openly hostile. It names what a trapper would rather not have named, pinpoints the hypocrisy that pretends the nauseating details are not there, and eventually shames him who might as little as consider trapping. The closing lines exclude the trapper from any community of living

beings. He is denied the status of a human being, reduced to that of an animal ("out of reach of other animals, it waits for you") and immediately, as if it were too generous to include him in the animal realm, denied membership even there.

Where the VOI is reassuring and sympathetic, Wagoner is critical or openly hostile. Where the VOI generously excuses the less admirable in us, Wagoner will shame us and our intentions. Where the VOI cheerfully approves of any aim it promotes, Wagoner repeatedly asks whether the goal as defined is worthwhile. For an instructor he can be as surprising as an author of a cookbook might be if, just before the time comes for putting the well mixed cake in the oven, he would ask, "Now, do you really want this cake?" Bringing out the VOI's evasiveness, Wagoner's poems dwell on the unpleasant details; critical of the VOI's confidence about the outcome, they acknowledge that anything, including the worst, may happen. The VOI benevolent and forgiving instructor is replaced in Wagoner's poems by a guide who can not only be ironic or sceptical but who can also sound at times disturbingly pleased by the possibility of his students' failure. There is clearly more than a warning to these words concluding "Walking in a Swamp" as the instructor imagines the unfortunate traveller at the point of sinking and remarks:

You'll sink even deeper  
Becoming an object lesson  
For those who wallow after you through the mire,  
In which case you should know  
For near-future reference: muck is one part water,  
One part what-have-you,  
Including yourself, now in it over your head,  
As upright as ever. (CP 252)

It is difficult not to guess the scornful grin with which this is said, or not to feel that somehow too much satisfaction rings in these words at seeing a bad student who would not heed warnings fail, and one's own predictions come true.

Even more disturbing is the metaphorical message of the poem. Struggling to remain upright in a literal swamp obviously makes no sense. Surviving depends upon giving in. But the poem cannot possibly be taken only at its face value. "Wallowing in the mire" is too much of the daily language's metaphor for moral degradation to be ignored as an invitation to read the lines as more general in reference. Yet the instructor in the poem does not allow for the possibility that, under some circumstances in the wilderness of social life, survival cannot be balanced against preserving one's dignity or humanity. To him survival is always the ultimate good, elasticity always a virtue. The satisfaction with which he views the prospect of his slow students' failure seems to be the same regardless of whether they foolishly adhere to principles in the woods or struggle to live by Principles out of them. In no other instructional

poem does Wagoner make his instructor sound equally provocative or confusing; in no other does one sense just as much evil lurking behind the ostentatious concern and well-wishing.

When Wagoner's instructor does not sound evil or malicious, he appears conceited or pathetic. He may be the physics teacher recalled in a poem in *Landfall* who introduces his students to "the world of Laws where problems ha(ve) answers" even though all his demonstrations prove to the contrary and "the housebrick lowered into a tub weighs (Eureka!) more than the overflow" (L 38) He may also appear as an individual who does not expect to be followed too closely or to be held accountable for his teaching. This is possibly the theme of "Tracking", a poem not entirely clear or easy to interpret from the wilderness section of *New Poems*. It differs from other poems in the series in as much as it does not offer instruction in how to get out of trouble but in how to cause it. Overtly it offers tips for tracking, yet with the exception of the title the activity is referred to only as "following", and the tracker's prey is not an animal or enemy but "the man ahead". Both terms, it seems, have been deliberately chosen as ample enough to evoke a non-wilderness context as well. That this context might be one of the instructor – student relationship is suggested when in the course of the poem Wagoner makes his language oscillate between the realms of rhetoric and woodlore. The would-be tracker is encouraged to "learn to read the minute *language* of moss and lichen ... the *speech* of sand the *gestures* of dust " so that he can detect whatever trickery the man he is following might resort to, whether it be rhetorical or woodsmanly (CP, 253, emphasis added). He is admonished to shuffle off "deliberate evasions", avoid being "sidetracked", and watch out for "blind trails". The man ahead in the poem is a guiding presence, an information source, yet his expertise is not entirely unquestionable; he seems to doubt it himself. Initially, he is "lighting fires by night to be seen for miles, / and breaking dead silence", yet once he finds himself followed, he starts running, counting on his follower to suffer discouragement. When eventually cornered, the poem says, he will stare back in surprise and fear "to see who's made this much of his footprints", calculating meanwhile whether his follower means "to kill him, join him, or simply blunder past". (CP 253) Instruction, Wagoner's point seems to be in the poem, illuminates with bright lights a way that upon taking turns out to lead no further than to the instructor himself, in this case a deceitful and confused individual.

In some of Wagoner's poems, however, the instructor's voice is indistinguishable from the poet's own. Wagoner may criticize teachers and guides and discredit the lessons they offer, yet he too has his own lesson to teach. Articulated most concisely, the lesson is to be found in the three closing lines of "Walking at Night". In the poem a man comes to the end of a street at the outskirts of town, goes past the last streetlight and into the countryside, and

though disoriented by darkness and the unfamiliar shapes underfoot, struggles onward. Moving clumsily, he relies on the only instruction available to him in the dark in midst of the unknown:

The only guides are the heart in my mouth,  
My body's guesswork,  
And sticks crackling under my feet as if in a dark fire. (CP 271)

Wagoner elaborates here on his principal instruction. The only trustworthy instruction, he claims in the poem, is that offered to us by our own minds and bodies as freed from all received wisdom and away from the comforts of streetlights and paved streets, they struggle to make sense of the uncomfortable situation. He advocates total abandonment to the moment, giving in, opening up to the Here and Now of circumstances. Only when all reference points are forgotten, and the body and the mind attune themselves to each other and to the circumstances, is their response likely to be meaningful and authentic. In the wilderness this means acting expediently so as to survive cold, hunger, and one's own panic. In life it means accepting everything, calamities and failures including, as starting points for self-discovery and growth. Not incidentally, one of Wagoner's favourite metaphors, and at the same time, the condition which is sometimes deliberately sought for by his poetic protagonists, is the condition of being lost. For those lost, Wagoner's instruction does not say: "do this or that to get out", though he may start with this more conventional kind of response, but rather, "consider whether the condition is not an interesting beginning of something new, a challenge to meet and learn from". To a man trapped in the forest Wagoner, the instructor says:

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers. ...  
Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you. (CP 182)

Elsewhere the thought is rephrased to communicate the same message not only to those lost in the woods but also to those perplexed by life's complexities. When confusion becomes overwhelming, the poet writes,

Your duties  
Are to rest and be recreated, then to stand,  
Ignoring all directions  
But your own, and to exercise your freedom of chance by aiming  
Somewhere, keeping a constant Here beside you  
As faithfully as your death. (BC 101-102)

At this point some obvious questions must be asked. How can Wagoner, without jeopardizing our respect for him claim that the instruction he offers is

more valid than that he denounces? Is he not only conceited as, in fact, he was once described by a reviewer who objected to his "Higher Smartass's" tone.<sup>14</sup> Is Wagoner blind to the contradiction between his general distrust of instruction and his own urge to instruct?

Wagoner does not dwell on the contradiction in any of his poems specifically, yet to claim that he is unaware of it is to do him injustice. For one thing, the contradiction is a trap into which all advocates of self-reliance (and self-reliance is the essence of Wagoner's message) inevitably fall the moment they venture to outline their concepts in any greater detail. This is the contradiction that underlies *Walden*. Thoreau was well aware of it when he qualified his advocacy of a particular life style saying that,

I would not have anyone adopt *my* mode of living on any account. I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* and not his mother's or father's or his neighbour's instead.<sup>15</sup>

Wagoner is never just as direct yet his preoccupation with the unreliability of teachers establishes enough of a leitmotif in his poetry to make his readers wary of all teaching regardless of who the instructor is. Or to put it differently, nowhere does Wagoner suggest that the criticism he voices does not apply to himself.

On the contrary, there is a note of humorous self-depreciation audible in several of his poems. "The Circuit" might serve here as an example. In this very personal poem, Wagoner comments on the urge to preach and on the effects of preaching recalling his great-grandfather, an itinerant Methodist preacher. The old man, who once "rode off ... each week to galvanize five Methodist churches", is now remembered in the family only for a joke played upon him by his neighbours; one Saturday he went to criticize a Sabbath breaking auction and was tricked into buying a clock which, ironically, three generations later is a more treasured family possession than anything the old preacher ever owned or taught. Wagoner observes,

Nobody mentions anything you did  
Except the clock.  
A joke thrown back of a horse  
Has lasted longer than your rules and reasons. (CP 84)

The old man's preaching left no impression upon the world he tried to correct, not even upon his own family. The poet, sensing in himself a kindred preacherly impulse, is sceptical about his chances to fare any better. The feeling is fostered by a sense of uncertainty about the value of his own teaching. Across years he seems to hear the dying old man comment scornfully

<sup>14</sup> Richard Howard, *Alone With America: Essays on the Art of Poetry In the United States Since 1950* (N. Y.: Atheneum, 1980), p. 638.

<sup>15</sup> H. D. Thoreau, *Walden* (N. Y.: Norton, 1966), p. 48.

upon his grandson's poems: "Where in the name of God is the name of God / In all these damned unsingable, useless poems?" (CP 84) And even if the old man's criticism is partly invalidated by the fact that Wagoner's reader is rather unlikely to share the preacher's criteria for poetic achievement, the poet does admit that, unlike his great grandfather, he is confused about the purpose, significance, and the impulse behind his poetic preaching. He sees himself reenact the old preacher's role, though with far less sense of purpose and much more of futility.

I bid for every clock I lay my eyes on  
Just for the hell it, your Hell and mine.  
Like you, I'm doing time in the hard woods,  
Tracking myself in circles, a lost preacher. (CP 84)

Wagoner may report his great grandfather's criticism with a wink, but here he is more seriously self-critical. His poetry and his teaching are presented as games played almost compulsively (as a bidder might compulsively attend auctions) by a man unsure of his reasons or the effects he desires ("just for the Hell of it"). He enjoys playing the games no less than he finds it torturous ("your Hell and mine", "I'm doing time in the hard woods"). The only thing he can say for sure is that in the process of playing he discovers the confusion of his own mind.

"The Circuit" represents one way Wagoner confronts the contradictions between his didactic interest and his instruction hostile message. More subtly and more interestingly he addresses the issue by searching for such a mode of discourse that would allow him to muffle the instructional character of his poems. This is most notably his strategy in a series of poems that close *In Broken Country*. Whereas Wagoner's earlier poems of instruction rely heavily on imperatives ("sit still", "give in" or "you must keep your goal in mind"), the poems in *In Broken Country* make use of what Richard Hugo once described as "a strange didactic tone of address / in which Wagoner/ doesn't so much tell us what to see and do, as he presents us saying and doing, yet the lesson is still there to be learned".<sup>16</sup> The opening lines of "Looking for Water" are typical of this method.

At the lip of your canteen, kissing the last sure drop  
Goodbye, you choose the least unlikely direction -  
Hills (if there are any)  
Or greenness (if there is such a shade), or somewhere familiar  
(If you can remember how some map unfolded  
For your civilized fingers  
By artificial light), or barring those choices, anywhere.  
You're keeping cool, in spite of the persuasions  
Of the surrounding air. (BC 105)

<sup>16</sup> Richard Hugo, "David Wagoner a Poet of Elizabethan Wisdom and Wit", *The Slackwater Review* (special issue, 1981), p. 123.



The absence of imperatives is very significant here. As they disappear, so does – apparently – the figure of the instructor. It is not him who stands in the poem's center as he does in Wagoner's earlier poems where he is the master of the occasion conjuring up possible future predicaments to offer his guidance and advice. Instead, it is ourselves who are dramatically thrust in the midst of an uncomfortable situation and who, under the stress of the moment, are presented making our own discoveries and decisions. Though Wagoner is no less of a teacher here than he is elsewhere (the parentheses, for one thing, by considering options, betray the predicament to be hypothetical, and the poem a piece of instruction), he intentionally obscures his role almost, one might say, disclaiming authorship and responsibility for the instruction.

In view of such self-effacing effort one might speculate whether the relative scarcity of instructional poems in the volumes that followed *In Broken Country* might not mean more than just loss of interest in the form which the author possibly decided he had overexploited. Could not the fact mean an eventual acknowledgement of the contradiction between the medium and the message, and surrender to the logic of one's own crusade against instructing? Several poems in the volumes that succeeded *In Broken Country* are notably concerned with themes similar to those which preoccupied Wagoner in his earlier instructional poetry, and they argue similar points such as the importance of unlearning knowledge (comp. "A Sea Change" in *Landfall*) or the rewards of "directionlessness" (comp. "The Land Behind the Wind" in *First Light*). Concerned with similar themes, the poems are, however, radically different in form; they are poetic narratives in which an unspecified "he" or some "us" discover ways to survive. As narratives the poems remain altogether oblivious to the reader's presence. They do not teach but instead confront us, as life does, with human experiences uninterpreted in their significance. From those experiences, like from the sticks crackling underfoot in "Walking at Night", we are welcome to extract lessons but this time with no instructor intervening.