Derrick Hill: Let me thank you again for doing this. Are you working on anything right now?

Wyatt Prunty: I’m working a poem, might be a book-length poem, called “Nod”—as in the Land of Nod—where Cain went after he killed his brother. It’s based on a guy who is on loose ends, who has lost his bearings and is in a parking lot outside Atlanta Georgia on July 3rd. A fellow shows him through the shopping mall after it’s empty.

I’m doing that and writing a book about poetry after World War II. It’s called *Rash and Compassion*, and it’s about the change-shift in poetry following the Second World War. The Modernists after World War I were very interested in experimentation and they wanted to be more objective and less personal. So you have Eliot and Pound and all those people that changed literature. The generation that was schooled by those Moderns, that fought in WWII, or lived through WWII, on average, turned out to be more romantic or more personal in the way the went about their business. I’m writing about that change. That is a book that is in manuscript, I have to go through it again.

So, I’m working on a long poem and this critical book and I’ve got to write a chapter for Oxford University on poetry since WWII. So, I have all those things to do and I’m off this fall. I’ve got a break from teaching so that’s what I’ll be trying to do. I can’t control the poem. I can control the prose.

DH: Often you’re associated with New Formalism. Do you consider that an accurate assessment? Do you align yourself with that movement, or do you feel you have adopted some of those qualities and moved beyond?

WP: I would say several things about that. I have been grouped with them and I am roughly of the same generation as a lot of those people categorized as New Formalists. I think, as a result of Modernist experimentation with free verse in the 1920’s, 30’s, and 40’s that it became an almost cliché in the 1960’s and 70’s—that if the poem was formal it was not authentic. It was a dry, arid, academic exercise and that the real substance in poetry appeared in free verse.

Great free verse poetry has been written and I wouldn’t say anything otherwise, but formal poetry has been around since, as we know it now, the Renaissance out of Middle English.

I grew up writing songs when I was in high school and they were alright. It was the 1960’s and people did that. I was very interested in folk literature for a while and so I was automatically pre-disposed to prefer something that would stand on the ground of immediate conviction the way a song does.

If you hear a song and the melody is moving, it arrests you and you want to hear it again, and it’s memorable. Frequently the words to songs are not all that thoughtful. The argument of a song can be pretty slight, but if the music is pretty nice then it is moving anyway.

Formal poetry takes advantage of the
melodic qualities of the English language in such a way that it reinforces what is being said with rhythm phonemes that function as notes with a kind of musical thrust. To not draw on the resources of the language, that is, the rhythms that are natural to the language and the piling up of similar sounds that are described phonetically for us—to not use a kind of musical ear when putting together a poem—is to not take advantage of a resource that is there.

I tell some of my students, ones who are far enough along and are interested in this sort of thing, that it’s a little bit like being a painter who doesn’t pay attention to color or who doesn’t pay attention to draftsmanship. We can all understand how a musician learning to play piano has a metronome and adheres to what the metronome says. The English language has this alteration between stressed and unstressed syllables.

I have always been interested in the advantages provided by what we call form—it is really just the sounds, rhythms, and noises that are already in the language. I’m just taking advantage of them. At the same time the experimentation that went into free verse and so forth, from my standpoint anyway, had its advantages because it gave you license to write about a broader range of subjects than what you might take up if you were continuously writing sonnets.

So I went through this college, Sewanee, writing formal poems really because I had written songs before that, and the people that read my poems then were Allen Tate, who had been an editor here of The Sewanee Review, Andrew Lytle, who was an editor. They liked the fact that poems were formal.

I wasn’t doing it because that’s what they preferred but that turned out to be the case. I was off oversea in the military and I kept writing formal poems, but when I went to Johns Hopkins everybody was doing free verse. I tried that out.

There are good things to be said from both sides of the fence and, in my case, I think form elevates utterance and, therefore, you are drawing on the natural properties of the language—the things that are in the language anyway—reinforcing what you are saying.

I prefer form, at least, formal rhythms if not rhyme, and form provokes invention. If you adopt a form you’ve got to live within the rules that you’ve accepted and, sooner or later, that means you are going to be revising some lines over and over and over again, and the fifth time, or the tenth time, or the twelfth time you write that line you will discover something that will be more interesting than what you would have used had you not been forced to say no to yourself that many times.

There is an inventiveness that goes with form, as I said before. Form is used because it enables a poem, auditorily, to function somewhat the way a song does, so that it stands on the ground of immediate conviction. It has this melodic property and, of course, a poem has to maintain an argument that a song does not. There the analogy between song and poem
begins to break down.

I wouldn’t side with one school with the exclusion of the other. I just seem to write formal poems more often. I have a certain reserve about some of the critical argument that has been put out with the New Formalist movement, which has settled down. We have gone to other things by now. I think sometimes people were so enchanted with form that they were talking more about verse than they were poetry. The form serves the poem. You don’t make a poem by just adhering to form.

DH: So you are writing about that shift from the more formal poetry after WWII?

WP: The confessionals. Yes. I think that following WWI most of us would agree that there was skepticism in the air. Gertrude Stein coined the phrase, “The Lost Generation,” to describe either, the people that were obliterated in WWI or whose lives were changed. If you go into the colleges in England, say, in Oxford, you will see tremendous, long lists of names of people who were killed in WWI, fewer in WWII—that generation that was made up of people like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Malcolm Kelley wrote a book called Exiles Return describing the world in the 1920’s following WWI. There was a real change. A lot of Americans were taken to Europe for the first time and then many who were not actually in Europe for the war wound up moving there for different periods of time. So there was a skepticism about hierarchies of meaning and about history as a reliable record of human experience, and even an increased questioning about human reason because of what we were, or were not able to do in WWI.

The Great Depression raised yet more questions. There were magazines such as The Partisan Review where people were looking at theories of socialism and trying to figure out if there was a better way to manage our affairs than modes we had been employing to date. I think that following WWII that skepticism, that doubt, only increased.

WWI was called the World War. It was supposed to be the “war to end all wars,” but, behold, we have another one in just two decades and we are back at it again. We have not just the Holocaust, which is the most carefully recorded and best understood horror, but we know there were horrors in Russia, China, and following Vietnam, there were horrors too. A Holocaust, a World War, a dropping of nuclear weapons on civilian targets—all that was just another round of shocking experience to make people question. I think in that generation coming along, late 1940’s forward, that there was a turn towards personalism or personal experience as the basis for the truth claims that a poem would make. You have the Beats, the Confessional Poets, the Black Mountain School; all through that you also had quite rational poets capable of any kind of formal practice they chose: Elizabeth Bishop and Mona Van Duyn, and Howard Nemerov and Richard Wilbur, and Anthony Hecht and Donald Justice, James Merrill—and I’m leaving out a bunch—W.D. Snodgrass. Snodgrass was Lowell’s student at Iowa and some people
think that Lowell, with *Life Studies*, which came out in 1959, was a turn towards confessional poetry with Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman going along that way too. Some people argue that Lowell’s student, Snodgrass, writing a book called *Heart’s Needle*, may have influenced Lowell a little bit, but somewhere in there it doesn’t really matter who influenced whom; there was some kind of agreement and there was a turn towards things more personal.

The poem was an ideal aesthetic object as articulated by the New Criticism, and the new critics did a great thing—managed many of the quarterlies. Poets after that 20-year period of the New Criticism being so influential, poets who had really been raised on that, began to do something different, in some cases. Wilbur kept doing what he was doing pretty much. A lot of people began to write a more personal poetry.

Then, you asked about the New Formalism, I’d say 15 years after that turn, somewhere in the mid 70’s, people closer to my age began to say “No, we want something more formal.” These swings occur pretty steadily.

I don’t know whether it’s still up or not, but the Guggenheim had a display, a show, called “Chaos to Classicism,” and it records painters and sculptors in Germany, Italy, and France following WWI. Those people turned back to a neo-classical ideal for the human form. You can see how they adhere to that pretty vigorously through the 1920’s and 30’s, but then Mussolini and Hitler were controlling the funding in the arts. So, particularly in Italy and Germany as you go through the 1930’s, you can see how human form began to look less and less like the Greek ideal and more and more like a New York Giants lineman, emphasizing power that went with the fascist governments.

Following the war there was great experimentation, but following WWI there was this turn to a neo-classical interest on the part of these artists in those countries. Towards the end of that period there was an exaggeration, and following WWII people did not go back to a neo-classical ideal. I think the first big thing that happened with the generation that came out of WWII was a gradual turn toward personal experience for authority in poems rather than allusion to things that had happened before.

That whole emphasis made another swing in the 1970’s, and I’d be damned if I know what is happening right now.

DH: How did your experience with writers such as Allen Tate shape you as a writer?

WP: I was taught by a number of people. This is one school where I didn’t interview and at the last minute decided I would come here. I didn’t know what I was going to find, but it turns out Sewanee had quite an English Department. I had to read everything from Middle English forward. I had several very fine teachers in the English Department. Tate was here towards the end of my time and I graduated and he was still here. He was a great teacher for me because I think I was ready to steal everything I could from him. He would read my poems and say, “Don’t do this, don’t do that,” and almost in all cases I understood what he was talking about right away. It was easier to understand what he was telling me to do analytically than it was to make it a habit on imagination. I had to work for that. He was very encouraging. He declared my poems publishable. He and Lytle would publish them.

Lytle would look to Tate for advice where poetry was concerned because Lytle was really a genius with fiction. Tate was the poet. They published them in the *Sewanee Review* when I was an undergraduate. That made a big difference. That was a vote of confidence on their part from two people old enough to be my grandfathers. I knew they had done a lot so I had some very good practical advice from Tate on stylistic matters. I had a lot of good direction from teachers here as to what I should be reading and, in fact, they made sure I read it. Then I had the practical encouragement of publication earlier than I would have ever expected. That sustained me really when I was in the service. Nobody was interested in literature there. I was a gunnery officer and my job was to shoot at clouds.

DH: A few years ago you appeared on a PBS special regarding the Fugitives. What kind of impact do you think that movement had on literature?

WP: They are part of Modernism. Allen Tate
was the first of that group to really reach out to New York, London, Paris, and to the larger world. Ransom was the genius of the thing, but Tate was the first person to make a pilgrimage out of the South. The Fugitives are terrific and wonderfully helpful for poetry today. They were great for Southern letters. They were part of the South’s reemergence into the larger culture following the Civil War. They were very interested in carving a place for Southern letters and for themselves in the larger discourse of the country. They were fortunate in the sense that it’s very unusual to have that much talent pop up in one place at one time. It’s partly a story of talent. It’s partly a story of the reemergence of the southeastern United States economically and culturally. It’s part of the fact that the South, having been in a war where slavery was an issue, had to be on the wrong side and lost. In losing [the South] gained finally, but lost a hell of a lot. The South had, and still has, a powerful story and has a slightly different sensibility partly because of hubris in the past and tragic outcomes from mistakes. There was also a lot of greatness woven into it. The average soldier that fought for the South didn’t own a slave. This was somebody who thought they were doing the right thing even as things went awry, particularly the average foot soldier. What were the motivations for people to go out and risk their lives? It wasn’t capital; it wasn’t money. It was some sort of notion of home.

The Fugitives came along at a time when they should have come along. Faulkner was not a part of the Fugitives, and he came along at about the same time. The South was recovering, and it was appropriate that people began to articulate the history, experiences of this region. I think the Fugitives happened and were unique because that was an exceptional collection of talent. I think that across the South that literature was going to reemerge.

Literature, unfortunately, doesn’t come out of settled times or times when life is easy—if it ever is. Literature almost is always born out of argument and conflict and stories that show that people on both sides of the issues have some strong points and some failings. So, the Fugitives were great for the region and they did something for the academy too because they mostly wound up with jobs in the academy. They actually homesteaded the support, the patronage of a lot of writers that live today. Even the fiction writers who make good money from time to time mostly hang their hats in the academy somewhere, and the Fugitives were pioneers as far as moving into the academy.

They also had an unusual effect on publication. The literary quarterly was invaluable from the middle of the last century, from the 1930’s on through the 60’s. Ransom left Vanderbilt and went to Kenyon and founded the Kenyon Review. Allen Tate edited the Sewanee Review. Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks founded the Southern Review in the 1930’s at LSU when Huey Long was the dictatorial governor and he wanted a great magazine. Bill Davidson, Don Davidson’s younger brother, started the Georgia Review. A fellow named Stringfellow Barr edited the Virginia Quarterly Review, which was already in existence. After WWII, Fredrick Morgan started the Hudson Review. Phillip Rahv started the Partisan Review, which was left-leaning, whereas the Southern Review was conservative.

Then Ransom founded the Kenyon School of Letters and he had both The Partisan Review crowd and The Southern Review crowd there and they would argue all day long and then drink together at night. They were all searching for ideas and the literary quarterly was a place where these ideas concentrated, and the quarterly was a place where modern poetry was published and the justification for modern poetry practice was carried out in literary criticism. Literary criticism was a big enterprise, thanks to the quarterlies. Many of the magazines, three of the most powerful ones, were either in the South or Southern. That is, Ransom was from the South so the Kenyon Review had the same character that Southern Review and Sewanee Review had. So the Fugitives also, by going out and setting up these magazines, extended their influence beyond just Vanderbilt initially and beyond just their own writing, which was really significant, and on into these magazines that featured other people’s writing—that writing having an affinitive with what the Fugitives and later, the Agrarians, as part of Modernism, were
DH: I’m curious about your background. Have you always been interested in literature?
WP: No, I thought it was an impractical ambition. I thought I’d have to be a lawyer or something. I got here and was told, “No, this is pretty good. You should try it.” I mentioned earlier that I wrote a lot of music. I read a lot of poetry when I was a kid. People in my family read it. My father was an academic. My grandfather was an academic. The world that you’re associated with, the world with art, was there for me from the beginning in one from or another. My father was also a scientist. He was a geographer. It was a combination of things. Geography is an unusual field. I was writing when I was a little boy. I was writing and making up melodies by the time I was eleven or twelve years old. It’s just literature interested me more than anything else. Either reading, or reading about authors, or trying to write my own myself: those were the endeavors I got into and never looked at the clock. I knew that about myself but I thought this is what you like but you’re going to have to make your living another way.

DH: Do you still pursue musical endeavors?
WP: Not really. I lost the use of this arm about eight or nine years ago for a while and that was kind of the last gas. No, this may sound odd to you, but the story I tell people is that the last audience that really appreciated my music and my performance was our children when they were young enough they could take baths together. They were maybe one and four, and instead of applauding they splashed. Anyway, I would play for them when they were getting ready for bed and I just put it aside. This is why: for one thing, I wasn’t learning any new music so it was just redoing what I knew and I was bored with it. I had no group to play with, which I hadn’t had for a long time. So that cut into the fun of it. I was not trying to do anything professionally. The satisfactions you can gain from writing a song are pretty much the satisfactions you get from writing a poem. I felt I had to choose so I had decided to put that emotional intensity—that time—on a legal pad instead of working on a guitar. It may have been a false dichotomy. It may have been an unnecessary choice, but at the time it seemed to me that I could put all my intensity into one thing and get more done.

Songs, if they click, are so pleasurable. They do get around, and it was a pleasure to perform them. You are with other people. When you write a song you are by yourself, but the purpose of a song is to get in front of some people and share it. Poems are a little more solitary. There are poetry readings and things like that, but the half-life of poetry is very interesting. These funny little things that are twelve and fourteen lines long, however many lines, have a way of hanging on for a long time. A song tends to be more of an emotion. Poems tend to have more of an element of exploration. You put torsions on the language, modify and change perspective, you push things around with a poem in ways that sometimes lead to discoveries that I don’t think you are apt to make with a song. It’s more expressive for questing some new way of understanding the world. I think that songs and poems are really very different. If I really wanted to do the one I had to give all my energy to that.

DH: Maybe we could talk a little bit about the Sewanee Writers Conference, a quick history of how it came about.
WP: I was teaching at Johns Hopkins in the writing seminars. It is a graduate degree in creative writing. If I wanted a good class I really had to recruit. I had some wonderful graduate students. A job came available here and I took it. In the letter of appointment, I thought I was coming to be the pet poet of the English department, and they gave me a reduced teaching load—what a research university teaching load would be as opposed to a college load. So I had a lighter load. My sense was that I was coming down here to be the writer-in-residence and teach poetry writing, maybe fiction writing, and teach modern literature or something.

But there was one sentence in my letter of appointment from the dean that said, “Should we ever have the financial wherewithal to do something with the Tennessee Williams gift, you will help the university organize that”—or
something—I don’t remember the language. It was a pretty innocuous little sentence. I got here in July and about a week later the attorney for the university, a man named Ed Watson who was a Sewanee graduate and also a Harvard Law School graduate, called me in and said, “What would you propose if we had some money from Williams?” And, really, we had a need. We needed to establish ourselves as being able to manage our own affairs. We didn’t have the money.

I said, “Three things: I would do a writers conference. I would do a book publishing series of some kind, and I would have fellows on the order of McDowell, only teaching would be added in.” So he was interested in establishing our ability to manage our own affairs because Williams had included Harvard in his will also. He wanted Harvard to receive his manuscripts, which Sewanee agreed was the right thing, and that was significant. Sewanee helped a lot in that decision because there were other people who might have wanted to claim Williams’s manuscript material. It was important the materials go to Harvard—they have the library for that. So we had supported them in that but what we needed was clear freedom to manage our own affairs otherwise.

So he said, “I have that need.” I said, “We can start a writers conference. That would be ideal and that would certainly be a very public way of showing we could manage things ourselves.” And he said, “Why don’t you do that?”

We didn’t have the money. Very little money had come the year before so I got an assistant to help me and started working almost immediately, and a year later we had the first conference. The way we started the Sewanee writer’s conference was I called all my friends and said this is what I’m proposing and they said, “This is a great idea. Count me in.” What I had to do was get participants here and get the tuition in order to be able to pay the people I had hired. So I lived in the subjunctive there for a while—between when I signed up all these people and when I actually got folks to enroll and pay the tuition so I could pay the people I signed up. Robert Stone and Tim O’Brien, Donald Justice, Howard Nemerov, Tina Howell, Mona Van Duyn, Ellen Douglas, Charles Martin, Emily Grozholz, and a list of others all said yes that first year. Within two or three years we were bringing in people like Arthur Miller and William Styron and Derrick Walcott. I invited him and then he turned around and won the Nobel Prize and he still came and talked. And Peter Taylor and many others, the best.

Part of it was Sewanee—you drove in today and saw what it looks like. Sewanee sells itself. It is a friendly place and it is physically beautiful. My friends in New York would be really worried they were going to be uncomfortable here in July, and I kept telling them, “You will be more comfortable in Sewanee than you will be in Manhattan or Brooklyn.” They would come down here—and except for the cicadas that made some of them uneasy at night, they really liked it.

So it is an extended community, and it just took a core of people to agree to the idea and say yes, we will give ourselves to that for twelve days. Once we had that then we were providing something that was really useful. The stronger the faculty, the stronger the applications, and the more strong applications you have the more selective you can be. Then you are getting people who are really ready for a workshop and that’s pleasurable for the faculty and they will come back. It’s a circular situation that, one way or another, got off on the right foot and has continued to go very well.

Maybe six or seven years after we were going, and really going well, Tennessee Williams’s sister Rose died. His first commitment in his will and his estate was to her maintenance. Once that happened there was more money to work with. Before then we were tuition-driven and were occasionally helped, generously some years, by Williams, and some years we had to tide ourselves over. By the eighth or ninth year it began to make a pretty substantial difference.

Williams really stabilized what we were doing and made it possible for us to do these Tennessee William’s Fellowships, which we still do in playwriting. We were doing it in fiction, poetry, and playwriting for a while, and then we had a wonderful series we published with Overlook Press, and Williams certainly made that possible.

Now we are saving a good deal of what we
get from Williams, building an endowment so that will always be able to provide what we do for writers. Eventually the plays will go into public domain and we will not have income.

Tennessee Williams, I think, is a wonderful story. His grandfather, Walter E. Dakin, went to Sewanee and was in the seminary. He was a priest down in Mississippi, and the most stable part of Williams’s life. Williams left his estate as the Walter E. Dakin Memorial Fund. He didn’t ask for us to talk about him at all. Of course, he knew what his plays were. He didn’t need a college to talk about him—he got his recognition. He left this gift in the name of his grandfather, which was wonderful, and he also, having gone to the Iowa Writers Workshop, had a notion of what really helps writers. He didn’t give his estate to a large school in a large city for performance. If he wanted performance he would have picked some place like Columbia. He picked a school out in the woods just as Iowa is out in the farmland, knowing that where you really teach people about writing is around the table, and that’s what we did first. We set something up where we could work with people on their manuscripts.

We also brought in publishers, editors of magazines, editors of presses, and literary agents, so we are a clearinghouse also. If one of our faculty members says this person is ready for publication either in magazine or book form, or production of a play, we have people who pass through here over that two-week period who are looking just for that—promising talent.

Williams favored experimentation. He wanted us to cover all three genres. It is a very simple request he made—two or three things emphasized. We have tried to do those things. His generosity, and the fact that he took the gift and handed it to an institution in such a way, made it possible to do as much as we have been able to do for others instead of using the gift to talk about Tennessee Williams alone. We do have a theater named for him. Just this week we are having events in his honor.

He certainly helped, but in the beginning what made it happen was a group of writers. Tim O’Brien never even asked what he was going to be paid; he just said, “Count me in. I’ll do it.” So it was a community of writers who thought it was a good idea. That’s what made it happen and Williams made it keep happening or happen better.

DH: It’s one of the few conferences where you can go and interact with the writers.

WP: That was another thing. I had taught at Breadloaf for years, and I loved Breadloaf, but it was a lot larger. It is almost a function of numbers. If you have a lot of people it is, obviously, harder to get access to some people. So, we have kept our size about half that of some other places. We have a different physical layout, and we have our strengths and weaknesses. We work hard for accessibility and try to make the living arrangements comfortable and the food as good as we can. We serve more wine than anybody else. We have receptions. We try to create a place where if you come in from out of town, and you’re going to be a little shy, we try to set up situations where there are many opportunities for conversation.

We have lots and lots or readings, after-hours readings, all kinds of stuff to bring people out of the woodwork that should be out of the woodwork. We do a variety of things.

The truth of it is the circle of friends. You asked about the Fugitives earlier, and that circle kind of reconstituted itself as the Agrarians, though they brought in some other fellows both the same and different. It was a community of writers who spread out across the country, some teaching in the North, some in California, and some in the South. Really what the Sewanee’s Writers’ Conference has turned out to be is a loosely connected community of writers that is different but has gone on for 20 years. People have come into it and moved out and come back into it. It’s a larger accordion movement than you had with the Fugitives but it’s not that different in that the heart of all these things had to do with aesthetic affinity, certain agreement among artists, and the fact that they like each other, and they stay in touch and influence each other and help each other. You share your work with somebody and they say, “You are going to have to do more work here” or “This is great.”

One of the great things about all these literary groups is that people that are farther along really are generous with wisdom, with what they
know, and if they see something somebody is doing and they believe in it and see it’s good and see promise, more times than not these writers will go out of their way to facilitate things for the person coming along. That’s probably the biggest thing I’m going to say about the Sewanee Writers Conference and about Tennessee Williams: when writers who have been fortunate or who have gotten along see an opportunity to help somebody else, they do it. They are not really getting paid to do that. They do it for the community. They do it for the company. They help younger people because they want to add to the collection of people. That just sort of runs itself.

I just have to try and get the right group of people together, and try to remember people and bring them back when they would like to come back. We play musical chairs a little bit but partly to let students who want to come back have access to different faculty. What happens, invariably, is that writers read manuscripts they admire, they see great promise, and they go out of their way to help that person either with advice or criticism or, if the person is farther along, maybe with an introduction. We are set up to do that too.