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Reading Poets

IN *A Defence of Poetry* (1595) Sir Philip Sidney sharply differentiates the philosopher, "who teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him," from the poet, who opens truth to the eyes of all. Over the last four centuries, however, poet and philosopher have become far more companionable. One of the most obvious symptoms of this gradual change has been the emergence of poetics—in both its aesthetic and epistemological aspects—as an essential counterpart to poetry itself. Lately, in fact, poetry and poetics have become so intertwined that it is nearly impossible to speak about either one without somehow incorporating the other. This merger of previously discrete disciplines is, I think, so intrinsic to the modern imagination that any brief analysis of its origins will be severely threatened by cliché and falsification. But because this merger has had such profound effects not only on the ways poems are written, but also on the ways they must be read, to avoid exploring the interrelationship of poetry and poetics is to remain in large part unconscious of what recent poets are trying to accomplish.

On the most general level it is poetics that opens an avenue between poetry and philosophy. And the modern poem is unquestionably absorbed with issues that are fundamentally philosophical. Foremost among these concerns is the felt need to restore a sense of communion between the poetic imagination and the natural world upon which it seems, to most poets at least, to depend for its existence; the felt need, that is, to formulate an epistemology that somehow resolves the subject/object dichotomy at the heart of modern philosophy. The means by which this rift can be bridged are clearly limited. One can choose to privilege mind in relation to world, as did T. S. Eliot in his conception of the objective correlative, thus centering the poem within the inner precincts of the self. One can choose to privilege the world of things in relation to mind,

as did William Carlos Williams when he formulated his dictum "no ideas, but in things," thus centering the poem within the domain of external reality. Or one can choose to explore the process of choosing without ever making a final choice, as did Wallace Stevens by following the act of mind "in the act of finding what will suffice," thus centering the poem within the realm of language and transcendental phenomena. One can, in short, choose to ground the world of the poem either in words, or things, or the self.

It might seem odd that I have excluded audience from this set of primary elements in poetic discourse. Admittedly, the poets I will discuss, and many besides, have been conscious of, even obsessed with, their potential audience. But they are concerned mainly with its absence or its shortcomings. Thus, rather than shaping their poems for a preexistent sympathetic readership, they seek to cajole, even castigate their readers, challenging them to *become* a good audience; that is, they seek to create an audience—most often through prose exhortations and complaints. Audience, therefore, is relevant only *post facto* and not *a priori* to their poetic rhetoric.

Poets have dealt with this estrangement in a variety of ways. Often they choose to speak in the first of Eliot's "three voices of poetry"—i.e., they talk to and for themselves, hoping someone will "overhear."¹ Or they write for a small audience of "inside" interlocutors made up of trusted and respected fellow poets. Eliot's Pound is the most notorious example, though the proliferation of poetic "schools" and coteries is, I believe, rooted in this same desire to have some audience, small as it might be, to receive one's work. In either case, the public or universal audience is both mistrusted and feared as a group too ill-schooled, too insensitive to fully grasp great and legitimately "new" poetry.

In an effort to compensate for this lack of an "educated" readership, many poets since the turn of the century have taken great pains to provide their potential audience with the tools necessary to read their poems properly. Pound, for example, delivers the *ABC of Reading* in the hopes that enough people will respond to his program and thereby get smart enough to read great literature, including his. Eliot, too, challenges his readers to learn for themselves what they will need to know to understand his work. As he says: "If you complain that a poet is obscure, and apparently ignoring you, the reader, or that he is speaking only to a

¹ See "The Three Voices of Poetry" in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957). Hereafter cited as *OPP*.

limited circle of initiates from which you are excluded—remember that what he may have been trying to do, was to put something into words which could not be said in any other way, and therefore in a language which may be worth the trouble of learning” (OPP, pp. 111-12). Stevens addresses the same question as he explores the function of the poet in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”: “Time and time again it has been said that he may not address himself to an élite. I think he may. There is not a poet whom we prize living today that does not address himself to an élite.”² Even Williams, a populist at heart, senses the inadequacies of the reading public and bridles against it in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”: “Look at/ what passes for the new./ You will not find it there but in/ despised poems./ It is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/ of what is found there.”³

Clearly, then, the pressures that audience exerts on the act of poetic invention are, for recent poets, mediated by the apprehension—most often an accurate one—that there is no listening audience large enough to be called a public, large enough, that is, to be subsumed into the immediate rhetoric of the poem. The poet, therefore, must provide his readers not only with the material worlds of his poems, but also with the “universe of discourse” within which those worlds can fully disclose themselves. He must formulate the unique poetic that guides and sustains his work. A poetic of this sort originates not at the center of a metaphysical framework commonly shared by both poet and reader, but at the shifting fringes of a private and singular epistemic system comprised of the three variables—word, self, and thing—I have designated as primary.

Word, self, and thing—these have admittedly been the simple elements out of which poems have always been made. What makes many recent poems different is, in my view, the uncommon privilege that any one of these elements is allowed to assume in relation to the other two, thus fixing the epistemological axle of the poem far off its center. In that very concrete sense the modern poem is eccentric by comparison to its predecessors.

When the three primary domains of poetic discourse converge at the center of the poem, the reader can begin with any one of them and

² Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), p. 29. Hereafter cited as *NA*.

³ From *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*, © 1954 by William Carlos Williams. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

proceed to reconstitute a poetic world that synthesizes the other two coequally. Where one chooses to stand in relation to the poem—i.e., how one begins to read—does, of course, have important consequences for the act of interpretation that ensues; but that initial stance will not prevent the reader from entering the world of the poem at all. For many recent poets (including those that I am concerned with here), however, the situation of the reader is quite different. For when one of these domains of discourse assumes a governing privilege over the other two, it is through that domain only that the world of the poem can be entered and interpretively realized. One must begin to appreciate the poem from the vantage point that it asks one to assume. And most often this requires one to view a particular author's poems through the epistemological lens that he provides, both indirectly through the body of his poetic work and directly through his prose statements on poetics. Only through that lens can the puzzling, often opaque worlds of his poems disclose themselves fully to the scrutiny of interpretation. Paradoxically, then, one must know how a poet thinks—adopt the syntax of his poetics—in order to know his world. One must read the poet who hovers behind the poems.

All three of the poets I have mentioned wrote voluminously on their poetic epistemologies, and all three were preoccupied with the same essential problem: how to bridge the subject/object dichotomy that is the legacy of Descartes. Let me begin to situate them within this philosophical framework by outlining the profound effect that Descartes had on the poetic enterprise in general. Descartes' project was motivated in large part by his desire to establish a position of status for the nascent physics of his time. In order to posit the fundamental reality of mathematical conceptions of nature, it was first necessary to call into question, as Descartes did with his initial stance of universal doubt, the "truth" of perceptual experience. By this stratagem the phenomenal world was made vulnerable to the charge that it was merely illusory; it could then be supplanted by a reality that was more general, in that it was more fundamental, more ideal—in the case of Descartes, more a function of mind, which never yielded to doubt in the first place. Having accomplished this mission Descartes then restored the phenomenal world to a position of trust and dependability by a tour de force based on the existence and probable honesty of God, who serves as the guarantor of mind's relation to world. In this process Descartes invented the modern notion of consciousness as entirely distinct and separate from the external world. He did not, of course, create, but he certainly fixed and

institutionalized a subject/object dichotomy that has since been the bane not least of poets, whose profession depends on the relational unity of mind and world.

Descartes started the engine of modern philosophy; he carved out a metaphysical furrow within which physical science could take root, and it has flourished. But he created a devastating dilemma for poets, who must build their worlds not out of abstract propositions and logical arguments, as philosophers seek to do; nor out of equations and formulas, as physicists seek to do; but only out of analogical language, which is by definition relational between mental and physical worlds. Without a sturdy bridge between subject and object, the worlds which poets construct become as illusory, as "unreal" as are the metaphoric materials out of which they are made. Of course, as long as there was a common faith that God was neither absent nor dishonest, this problem was only potentially catastrophic. Thus, for example, while Coleridge was clearly aware of the need to resolve the dualism upon which classical physics and modern philosophy seemed to depend, a project which he pursued for his entire life, he was able to write synthetic poems, confident that they were illusory (and therefore trivial) only at their surfaces; confident, that is, that they were ultimately in touch with a truth as irresistible and verifiable as Newton's laws.

Had Descartes foreseen the collapse of theological faith that occurred during the nineteenth century, he might have been more attentive to his argument for the reality of the perceptual world. But he didn't, and he wasn't, and as the twentieth century opened, bereft of the metaphysic that sustained the world for Descartes, poets were finally faced with the full consequences of his dualistic philosophy.

This is admittedly a very narrow and highly fictionalized version of the philosophical roots of recent poetry—nothing is ever quite this simple—but it does, I think, provide a sense of the central problem that Eliot, Williams, and Stevens faced in their efforts to constitute the worlds of their poems. And each of them found a different resolution for the epistemological dilemma that the subject/object dichotomy presented.

Eliot's philosophical biases were shaped in large part by his early absorption with F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*, which he cites in one of the more famous notes to *The Waste Land*: "My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to

the others which surround it."⁴ It is in this conception of mind as self-enclosed around not only its own thoughts and feelings but also, through its perceptions, around the physical world, that Eliot's subjectivism is rooted. It manifests itself in his preoccupation with solitary characters, as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and disembodied voices, as in *The Waste Land*. But its primary effect is an epistemological one that governs his strategies for construing and shaping the material worlds of his poems. Eliot describes the most general of these strategies in his definition of the poem as an objective correlative: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."⁵

On the particular level of tropes, the major effect of this bias is a heavy reliance on personification as a relational device between self and world, a dependence clearly illustrated in the opening of "Prufrock," where sky, street, and fog become bizarrely animate. But much more significant is the nature of the relationship it establishes between subject and object. The objective correlative attributes a dominant privilege to

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 54.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen & Co., 1920), p. 100. Eliot is here discussing dramatic poetry, a case in which the emotion being represented is not the author's. But the method applies for Eliot in his nondramatic poetry as well. As he makes clear in "The Three Voices of Poetry," the dramatic monologue is essentially a self-expressive rather than a dramatic mode of poetic discourse: "What we normally hear, in fact, in the dramatic monologue, is the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up either of some historical character, or of one out of fiction" (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 103). Thus in all of Eliot's poems rendered in the first two of the three voices of poetry (the poet talking to himself, as in "The Preludes" or "Ash Wednesday," and the poet addressing an audience through a persona, as in "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*) it is the emotion of the poet himself to which the objective correlatives refer. It is also important to note briefly here some of the problems associated with Eliot's various uses of the term "emotion" in relation to poetry. Here, as in most cases, Eliot is using the term to denote generically those psychic states that we call by specific names—anger, fear, love, etc. Eliot generally uses the term "feeling" to denote the ineffable primal field out of which all poetry issues; in other words, following Bradley, "the general condition before distinctions and relations have been developed" (see Eliot's *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* [London: Faber and Faber, 1964]; see also Eliot's discussion of Gottfried Benn in "The Three Voices of Poetry"). It is out of this inaccessible background that subject and object emerge, the former depending on the latter as its means of expression. Thus, while Eliot seems to establish an ontological equality between subject and object—in that both are fundamentally illusory—the epistemological priority, the poetic privilege, is clearly assigned to the subject.

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emotions in their relationship with things. The mind, beginning with an emotional impulse which is by definition expressible only mediately through correlatives, seeks the material by which it can make and present an image of itself. The proper arrangement of this material, taken piece by piece from the world of things, allows emotion to manifest itself. The poet can thereby transcend his utter solitude, "escape" from his "personality" in Eliot's words, and make his inner self evident to others. The principal task of the poet, then, is to discover ways of dismantling the world and reshaping it according to the overriding will of the emotions. Language, to the extent that it is by nature referential to things, provides the medium. Yet it is not the real things upon which concrete and metaphoric language depend for their significance that are of interest to Eliot. Words are not signs or symbols of the things they name. They are, or can become by their connotative powers, signs and symbols of the poet's mental life.

While Eliot's poems very often seem to be rendering "real" observations, as, for example, in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," or in the opening stanzas of the "Preludes," they are by no means objectivistic. For the overriding motive of the poem is the translation of a series of discrete images into the feeling for which they are meant to stand, "the thousand sordid images/ Of which [the] soul [is] constituted." The image is for Eliot, then, as it was for Pound, an analogue rather than a representation—"that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"⁶—and its material components refer not to the objective universe but to the poet's mental states. The world of things is useful mostly because it provides an inventory of raw materials which the poet can browse through, picking one object here, another there, collecting and arranging them to make an image of the mental state that motivated the search in the first place. The integrity of the material world is sacrificed entirely, or nearly so, to preserve the integrity of the feeling mind, "moved by fancies that are curled/ Around these images, and cling." Thus, the "objectivity" of the correlative is peculiarly insubstantial, directed not toward the world, but toward the mind of the poet building images of itself.

Reading any essentially subjectivist poem like Eliot's must involve, as New Criticism recommends, a thorough study of the internal inter-

⁶ Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts," first printed in *Poetry* 1, 6 (March 1913). Reprinted in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, eds. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, 1973), p. 37.

actions and collocations of its material metaphors. By coming to a fuller and fuller understanding of the intrinsic connections which the poet artfully constructs within the poem, one can begin to generate an emotional state that, while not identical with, is at least correlative to the poet's own. The reader may, in fact, come to know something about his culture and his world by reading Eliot; but he must first come to know Eliot, whose shaping emotion has made a world for itself, made itself the world. He must, in short, read more than the poems; he must read, through them, the poet himself.

At the opposite extreme from Eliot, along the range of choices which Cartesian dualism inscribes, stands William Carlos Williams, whose choice in favor of the priority of the objective world is unequivocal and insistent. The epistemological framework which supports Williams' poetic vision is essentially American in that it derives in large part from the transcendentalism of Emerson and Whitman. Given the absence of God, it is, of course, a transcendentalism of a strange sort. Rather than providing access to the spiritual reality which sustained it, as the world of things did for Emerson and Whitman, nature for Williams provides opportunities for the egoistic self to transcend its own boundaries and participate through acts of the imagination in the fullness of being. As with Emerson, the poet "himself becomes 'nature'—continuing 'its' marvels";⁷ and the function of the imagination is "not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it" (*WCW*, p. 25). The objectivist poem becomes a sort of nonprescriptive meditation which uplifts objects, through the imagination, into a realm of transcendence that they themselves disclose.

In "Spring Strains," for example, one can see the process by which such poetic transcendence takes place. The thin tissue of bud that separates tree from sky becomes the locus of the poet's imagination. By projecting himself to that point he can enter the dynamic interplay of events that constitutes the first advances of spring, advances that are both violent and tentative, full of both struggle and desire. Out of that thin tissue a whole world issues—along the axis of the tree down to the earth, along the axis of the light up to the sun. The poet's imagination becomes, like the sun, the "creeping energy, concentrated/ counter-

⁷ William Carlos Williams, "Prose from *Spring and All*," in *William Carlos Williams*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 24. Hereafter cited as *WCW*.

force" that allows the world of things to disclose a place for it to dwell for a moment until like the birds it is "flung outward and up—disappearing suddenly."

Whereas with Eliot subject dismantles and reshapes the world according to the demands of its emotional imperatives, with Williams subject yields to the object and allows itself to be reshaped in its image. This is not to say that Williams' conception of art is mimetic or representational. For his method is: "to make a start/ out of particulars/ and make them general." As he explains it: "The inevitable flux of the seeing eye toward measuring itself by the world it inhabits can only result in crushing humiliation unless the individual raise [himself] to some approximate co-extension with the universe. . . . In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality" (*WCW*, pp. 16-17). Thus by investing his attention in the particulars that are immediately present to him, the poet encounters the general that they allow him to express. There are, in short, "no ideas, but in things." We can see this relational dependence of mind on world in poem after Williams poem, but nowhere is it more baldly expressed than in "The Red Wheel Barrow."

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.⁸

This poem yields only grudgingly, if at all, to the tools of formalistic criticisms. Yet it is a mistake to dismiss it too quickly as slight or, even worse, trivial. It does, in fact, provide an important cue toward Williams' epistemological stance, and toward the stance he is recommending to his reader. The simple setting imaged here is, or should be, as arresting to the reader as it is to the poet; and a great deal does depend on it. For Williams is not asking the reader to "stop and smell the flowers" from time to time because the world is full of pretty things. He is claim-

⁸ From *The Collected Earlier Poems* of William Carlos Williams, © 1938 by New Directions Publishing Corporation. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

ing, I think, that the world itself is not there unless one yields himself fully to the imperative of its presence, participates in its forms, and inhabits its shapes. As he says, "only when this position is reached can life proper be said to begin since only then can a value be affixed to the forms and activities of which it consists" (*WCW*, p. 17).

One can, as I suggested earlier, remain largely within the confines of an Eliot poem and experience the richness of the world that it constitutes. Williams' poems are utterly different: they are more like small islands whose principal effect is to suggest the immensity of the sea that surrounds them; or like footsteps across a field of snow which, by their own emptiness, transform the seemingly empty expanse of white around them into a remarkable fullness. Williams' poems are really as simple as they seem, they are what they appear to be; it is futile to sift and study them from the inside looking for hidden complexities and symbolic significances. One must approach them as instances of a particular way of seeing the world and move from the inner world of the poem to the epistemological field that surrounds and sustains it; one must turn the poem inside out and attempt not to see *what* the poem asks one to see, but to see *as* the poem beckons one to see. Williams is not asking his reader to become absorbed in the separate worlds of his single poems, but to use the sum of them as instances of the various ways that one can abandon himself to world and dwell poetically with the simple and beautiful things that allow themselves to be disclosed to the most attentive mind. Again, one is not just reading poems, but reading a poet.

This strategy for reading is not dissimilar from the one that Wallace Stevens' poetry seems to demand. Single Stevens poems in isolation, especially the shorter ones, are often strangely opaque, sometimes bizarrely inexplicable. Yet read with a full awareness of the epistemological problems that obsessed Stevens from the start, they become both lucid and breathtakingly insightful.

As I suggested at the outset, Stevens was never able to choose between subjectivism and objectivism as a resolution to the mind/world dichotomy. Often, as critics have observed, he seems merely to be bouncing back and forth, privileging imagination here, as in "Domination of Black"—where the poet's "remembered . . . cry of the peacocks" finally dominates—and reality there, as in "The Snow Man"—where the poet, "nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Yet this view is, I think, overly simple. For in every instance what Stevens does find is a momentary bridge across the gap that sepa-

rates mind from the world. And he does it not by privileging mind in relation to world nor vice versa, but by coordinating both of them through language, which can provide bridges of many different kinds. In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Metaphors for a Magnifico" Stevens explores some of the various ways by which humans can construe their worlds or vice versa. And every one of those acts of construction is, in Stevens' view, legitimate and coequal in that all are essentially linguistic events of a particular sort. For Stevens, poetry is an equation with two variables, "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (*NA*, p. 27). His principal concern, though, is not with the variables themselves, but with their functional interdependence; not, if you will, with the *X* and the *Y*, but with the equal sign that connects them. And for Stevens that equal sign is made of words—words that are neither of reality nor of the imagination, but that make it possible for both to exist together. It is through language that the subject/object rift is resolved and transcended. As Stevens explains the process in "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain":

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.⁹

"Word for word" the poem can in fact take "the place of a mountain." For, as Stevens says, "a poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words. . . . Poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words" (*NA*, pp. 32–33). Poetry, "the supreme use of language" (*NA*, p. 19),

⁹From *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, © 1954 by Wallace Stevens. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

"gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (*NA*, p. 31).

This relational function of language is accomplished in Stevens' poems by means of transcendental analogies, which he describes as

the pictorializations of men, for whom the world exists as a world and for whom life exists as life, the objects of their passions, the objects before which they come and speak, with intense choosing, words that we remember and make our own. Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence. . . . Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world. . . . (*NA*, pp. 129-30)

As I suggested earlier, the world of an Eliot poem can exist in some substantial way independent of its verbal vehicle, which refers to a mental state that exists prior to language though it seeks its forms there. Likewise for a Williams poem, which refers to a perceptual world that continues to exist outside the field of the poem. But take away its verbal surface and the world of a Stevens poem will vanish entirely and immediately to nothing, to the "fatal X" of reality or the equally fatal Y of the imagination. Nowhere more eloquently than in "The Idea of Order at Key West" does Stevens illustrate this transcendental effect of "the maker's rage for order":

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.¹⁰

For Stevens, then, "there is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly," he goes on, "poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel: a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verbiage" (*NA*, p. 118).

Because the rhetoric of that parallel can alternately shift its emphasis one way or another, momentarily subordinating nature to imagination

¹⁰ From *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, © 1954 by Wallace Stevens. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

or vice versa, one can never rest finally in either realm, but must hover with Stevens on that transcendental linguistic horizon that is their mutual boundary. Again, one must read the poet and not simply the poems.

The relationship between poetry and poetics that is so important to Eliot and Williams and Stevens is equally important to Pound and Zukofsky and Olson and Duncan and Creeley and Bly and Levertov—to mention only a few of the recent poets who have also elaborated their poetics in print. And what is true for them is generally true for almost every twentieth-century poet I can think of. For whenever historical circumstances make it necessary, as they recently have, for a poet to invent not only poetic worlds, but also the grounds upon which those worlds can stand, a preoccupation (if not an obsession) with poetics is inevitable. This is the case not only for those who must write poems, but for those who read them. For these poets demand an extraordinary generosity and a special discipline from their readers. One must be willing to master the epistemology, to stand where the poet stands, and to judge his or her work from there. One must be willing to adapt to new, often unfamiliar mythologies; to seek to master subtle, often arcane systems; to divest oneself of domineering biases. One must yield fully to poem after poem after poem until one can confront that specific poet and learn how to live the poems.

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